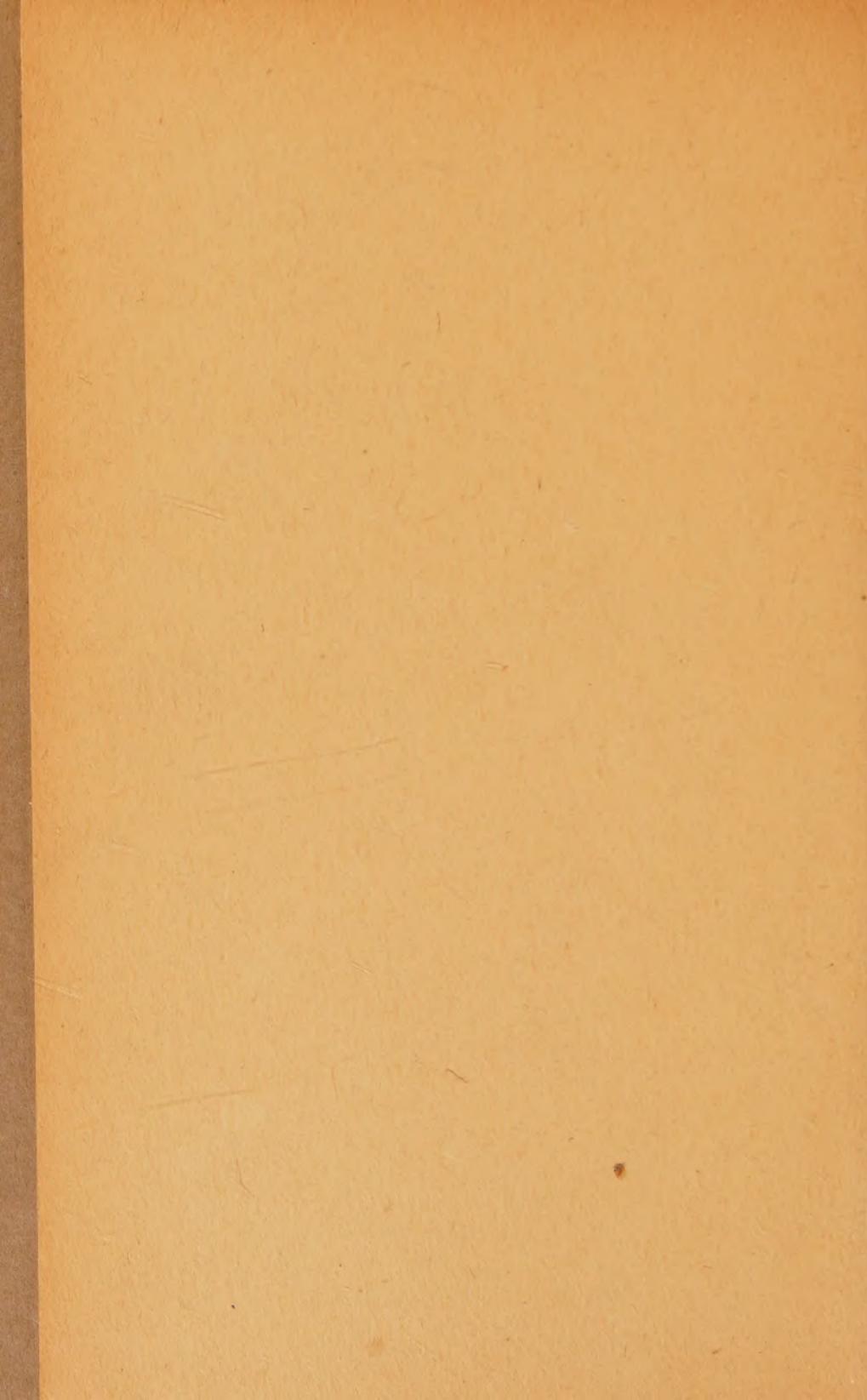


# CAUGHT IN A FOREST FIRE









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"STEVE WAS BREATHING HARD AGAIN"

# Caught in a Forest Fire

BY

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# CAUGHT IN A FOREST FIRE

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## CHAPTER I.

### TAKING BIG CHANCES.

"I'd go mighty slow about trusting to that new ice, Steve!"

"That's so. It isn't much more'n half an inch thick, you know. And Uncle Jim says this pond, where he gets his pickerel supply, is *awful* deep in some parts."

"And the w-w-water's j-j-jolly cold, b-b-believe me!"

But headstrong Steve Dowdy only laughed at these warnings from three of his chums. The one who had spoken first was Max Hastings, the natural leader of his mates. Next in line was Clarence Griffin, who, on account of his rather short and far from straight lower limbs, had been answering the name of "Bandy-legs" for most of the years of his young life.

As to the stutterer, that was Toby Jucklin, an

orphan, who lived with a guardian in the distant town of Carson.

There was one other lad along, a cousin to Max, and known as Bookworm Owen. But just at this time he was busily engaged elsewhere, possibly making notes of certain strange things he had lately seen and experienced.

These five boys were far away from home at the time Steve began to show how much he knew about the holding power of the first fall ice.

In fact they were in the heart of the North Woods. Great forests lay on all sides of them for many miles. And snuggled in the midst of this timber belt was the cozy cabin of old Jim Ruggles, better known far and wide as Trapper Jim.

He had taken a great fancy to Max and his chums while visiting his brother in Carson. Learning that they were very fond of outdoor life, and had already enjoyed several camping experiences, the old man, once a college graduate himself, had made them promise to visit him at the first favorable chance.

That came sooner than any of them expected at the time.

Repairs were absolutely necessary to the high-school building in Carson. And, of course, this fact was not discovered until vacation was two thirds over.

So the alterations were begun. Then it was learned too late that they could not possibly be completed until the middle of November.

There was no building in town that could be used meanwhile; and much against the will of parents and trustees, but greatly to the delight of the many pupils, vacation period for them was continued ten weeks beyond the usual opening time.

And so the five boys had immediately arranged to go up to the cabin of Trapper Jim, and learn more or less about the mysteries of the vast wilderness.

They were learning fast, and during the time they had already spent in the society of the genial old woods ranger, many were the stirring adventures that came their way.

These boys did not have to depend upon their parents for the means wherewith to enjoy a good time. They had a club bank account of very respectable size, upon which they could draw when anything was needed to make their camping outfit more complete.

It is worth while telling about the clever way in which they earned so much money, though the same thing could probably be done in very few sections of the United States.

Along the banks of the Big Sunflower, a stream

that flowed into the Evergreen, on which the town of Carson stood, the boys, during their fishing trips, had noticed that there were many mussels, also known as fresh-water clams.

These shellfish grew to a very fair size. Occasionally some farmer on an off day would rake up a mess of the clams and take them home for "clam chowder." But, as a rule, the muskrats and other animals were allowed to work their own sweet will upon the mussels of the Big Sunflower.

The boys had thrown the shells about. Sometimes they carried home a few with especially handsome interiors, just to keep among their souvenirs and curios.

Then Max and Owen got to talking of some articles they had read about fresh-water pearls of considerable value being found in streams out in Indiana, Arkansas, and other States of the Central West.

These in their home river seemed to correspond with the ones that held such fat prizes. The shells were certainly lined with mother of pearl, such as is in demand in the manufacture of pearl buttons.

'After talking it over, the Hastings boys finally organized a camping expedition, the main purpose of which was an investigation into the possibilities of those same Big Sunflower mussels.

Those who have read the first volume of this series know what great success attended this venture. The many pearls captured by the five chums during the short time they were in camp brought quite an astonishing sum when sold by Mr. Hastings to a leading jeweler in the big city on his next visit there.

When the secret leaked out, that part of the river known to contain the wonderful shellfish was raked and combed foot by foot by eager fortune hunters. Hardly a score of mussels could have been left to bemoan the fate of their tribe. The muskrats and 'coons would have to go elsewhere now if they had their minds set on an oyster dinner.

But the result of all this raiding was so very small that most people refused to believe the story of how clever Max and his chums had taken all the cream off the milk before they allowed it to be known that fortune had been knocking at the door of Carson all these years, unheard until two lads came along and applied printed facts to everyday work.

And since their period of stay in the woods had been lengthened another week, following a letter recently received by Max from his father, the five chums were feeling in high feather.

It was not yet the end of October, but winter hustles along very early up in the great North Woods,

and ice had been forming every morning now for the past week.

On the last two nights the cold had been intense enough to put a blanket of ice all over the pond that lay not very far away from Trapper Jim's cabin.

And when the four boys walked over to feast their eyes upon the new ice, wishing they had been wise enough to bring their skates along, why, of course, it was impetuous Steve who evinced an uncontrollable desire to be the first to cross the pond.

They had tried the ice close to the shore, where in the shallows it had seemed capable of bearing their weight. Where they found white ice, showing airholes, they had promptly put their heels through it.

And foot by foot Steve was edging out toward the middle.

It was at this time his three companions warned him to be careful, and Steve, as usual, only laughed, as though he believed he knew as much about the holding ability of newly made ice as any of them.

This impulsive nature possessed by Steve Dowdy had brought him lots of trouble. After each affair in which his impetuosity caused him to experience keen regrets, Steve would appear truly penitent, and announce with a grand flourish of trumpets that,

having seen the error of his ways, he had now reformed, and meant to go slow.

But soon the boys would find him back in the old rut, trying to hurry things, cutting across lots, and as impatient of restraint as ever.

"Bah!" he cried out, taking still another little slide away from the shore, "who's afraid? Guess you fellers don't know how strong new ice can be. It ain't all punky and rotten like old stuff. Why, I've skated over thinner ice than this, and had it bend like India rubber, and I never broke in. Teach your grandmother to suck eggs, will you? Watch me!"

"But, Steve," called out Max, "there's a big difference, you know."

"Difference in what?" demanded the other, as he took three more short, rather cautious steps, being now some distance from the shore.

"When you had skates on you glided along swiftly," Max continued.

"You're right, I did," said Steve.

"And the ice didn't have a chance to break because you came and went so fast. It's different now, you know, Steve. Your whole dead weight comes on a certain spot. It's so when a crowd gathers on the ice."

"But, Max, I tell you it's strong enough to hold Uncle Jim even," protested the venturesome one.

"Better come back, Steve," Max went on to say.

"Too late now," sang out the other gayly. "Got a starter, and might just as well cross over. I want to say I was the first to walk on the water this year."

"It's l-l-late for s-s-swimming, S-s-steve," shouted Toby.

"Rats! Who's thinking of being ducked, anyhow; not me!" jeered Steve, who had evidently taken the bit between his teeth again, as was always the case when one of those uncontrollable fits came upon him.

Max wasted no more breath in calling out, for he realized that it would be useless.

"Better let him alone, boys," he remarked, when he saw a tendency on the part of his two companions to further jeer at the venturesome Steve; "talking does no good when Steve makes up his mind. All you can do is to let him have his own sweet will."

"But just hear that ice crack, would you?" said Bandy-legs, as several sharp reports rang out.

"I hear it," replied Max.

He was keeping his eyes on Steve, who had paused, and hesitated, when these detonations were heard. The boy glanced toward them. Perhaps caution

told him that he had better turn back. But Steve was very proud and highstrung. He could not admit defeat, nor stand being laughed at by his chums for showing the white feather.

He turned again, and with set teeth took several bold steps. There were more nerve-racking snaps, as the cracks in the new ice extended.

All of these lads were accustomed to hearing such sounds as they flew over the smooth surface on their steel runners. As a rule, it proceeded from the ice anchored along the shore, and meant no harm. But Max really believed there was a vast difference when one ventured slowly.

"He'll go in yet, as sure as shooting!" exclaimed Bandy-legs, who had never been noted for his daring, and at times was even timid.

"I'm thinking that myself," returned Max.

Even as he said this he turned away from his two chums, and took several quick steps. The others were dismayed. They could not guess what it could mean. When a chum was in danger it was not like Max Hastings to desert him.

"Hey! where are you going, Max?" called out Bandy-legs. "Don't leave us here to watch Steve smash through. We'll need you the worst kind."

"S-s-sure t-t-thing," echoed Toby.

But just then they saw Max bend and pick something up.

"Huh!" exclaimed Bandy-legs, "he's got that board I fetched over from the cabin, when I thought to try and make a raft, so's to fish the middle of the old pond."

"B-b-big head," remarked Toby, who usually confined his utterances to a few words on account of his infliction.

Max now came toward them. True enough he had hold of a fairly sized plank, one of a few Trapper Jim had brought up into the woods when he built his cabin, so as to make bunks, and lay a decent floor.

Bandy-legs was just starting to say something to Max, in connection with his admiration for the other's forethought, when there came a sudden shout from out on the pond, accompanied by a crash and a fierce splash.

Steve, after all his boasting, had broken in.

## CHAPTER II.

### BANDY-LEGS GIVES THE ALARM.

“STEVE’s broken through!” gasped Bandy-legs.

Left to himself the boy would never have known what to do. Urged on by his warm personal friendship for Steve, which was genuine, in spite of their almost constant bickering, Bandy-legs might have foolishly started out on the treacherous surface of the pond, just as he was.

The consequence of this folly must have been shown when the ice gave way under his weight, and there would be a pair of them in the cold water.

So that after all it was a lucky thing for Steve, and perhaps Bandy-legs in the bargain, that Max, long-headed Max, chanced to be on hand.

He did not waste any time about it, either. When a fellow plunges through the ice where the water is possibly twenty feet deep, prompt action is needed to effect a rescue. The coldness of the water is apt to benumb the faculties of the unfortunate one, so that he quickly succumbs.

"Stay on shore, both of you, and leave it to me!"

That was what Max flung over his shoulder. He was already in motion, even while thus giving his directions to the others, heading straight for the ice-covered pond. Steve was kicking up a tremendous row, trying to climb up on the ice with sudden desperation, only to have it continually give way under him.

Bandy-legs was accustomed to minding Max, especially in a case like this. And besides, he had no particular desire to take chances, when there was no need. If Steve could be rescued, Max was able to accomplish the work alone and unaided. The more there were upon the pond, the greater danger of the ice giving way in other quarters.

As for Toby, he ran down to the edge, and ventured out a dozen feet, after which he stood and watched, deeply anxious. Toby, as a rule, could be depended upon to do the right thing in an emergency. His hesitation affected only his speech, and not always there either, for he was striving to overcome the fault.

When Max started to run out upon the ice, dragging the long board, he heard it cracking furiously again, so that it sounded very much like pistol shots. But this did not alarm him, for he had faith in his theory that safety lay in quick action.

Had Steve started boldly across on a run, as his nature suggested, the chances are no accident would have followed. But with his chums urging him to come back, Steve had hesitated, and made slow progress, with the result as seen.

Straight out hurried Max, all the while hugging that end of the plank. He would not have let go of that for anything, because he believed it spelled safety for himself and rescue for poor Steve.

"Quit that threshing about, or I can't get near you!" he called at the top of his voice as he continued along.

And really it was necessary to speak pretty loud, for the ice was sending out regular volleys of sharp crackling sounds—even the concussion of his heels added to the racket, and there was frantic Steve, splashing, gurgling, and falling back into the water every time he managed to drag his soaked form half-way up over the edge of the ice field.

"Help, Max!"

Steve forgot all his pride. The chill of the water, added to the horror of drowning, cooled off his bold ardor. He was even willing to call upon his chum for assistance. Steve on dry land and Steve in the clutch of the icy flood were two very different personages.

"It's all right, Steye," Max called out, wishing to

encourage the other; "I'll get you out easy enough, if you'll just do as I say. But I can't help you unless you stop smashing the ice all around."

"Tell me what to do then," chattered Steve, the cold water and the sudden terrific nervous strain making his teeth fairly rattle together.

"Stay still, and hold on to the ice to buoy you up. There, that's the way. Now, watch me shove this board out to you."

Max had by this time advanced as close to the other as he dared go. And not wishing to give the ice a chance to break under his own weight, centered on one particular spot, he dropped the long plank, heading it directly toward Steve. Then he stepped on it, distributing his weight over sixteen feet of ice, instead of barely one. Five boys might have stood along that plank now, with but little danger that it would cause the ice to give way.

But the end of the plank fell short of reaching Steve's eagerly outstretched hand by some three feet.

"Can you break your way to it, Steve?" asked Max. "If I stand on the ice, and lift the board, all my weight, and that of the board, too, will come in one place. For me to break through just now would be a bad job."

"G-g-guess I can do it, all r-r-right," answered Steve.

Toby would have marveled to hear him stuttering, but it was the violent working of his jaws that made him do it.

"Careful now, Steve, don't be too rash!" warned Max.

"Oh, I'm all r-r-right, Max—c-c-cool as a c-c-cucumber."

Evidently this was a stray flash of Steve's customary humor. But it served the purpose of assuring Max that his coming had begun to allay the panic into which the other had fallen, when he found he could not drag himself out of the cold water, owing to the treacherous thin ice.

So Steve once more rested his weight on the edge as he managed to work one knee up.

"It's holding—I can get out myself!" he exclaimed in renewed triumph; but alas! with the last word there was a lunge, and Steve disappeared from the sight of his anxious chum.

He immediately came up again, puffing and scrambling, and looking like some big water dog.

"Take it slow, Steve!" cried Max. "It's broken now to the plank. This time get hold of the board, and crawl up on that."

He even started forward to lend a hand, but see-

ing that Steve still possessed energy enough to drag himself out, Max held back. He had always to exercise caution and good judgment. Safe on the plank he could be of great assistance to Steve. In the water he would be about as helpless as his chum.

Now the dripping boy had succeeded in pulling himself up on the plank. Bandy-legs from near the shore let out a wild whoop to express his satisfaction. But Max knew that they were still far from safe.

"You've got to make a run for the shore, Steve," he said; "just like I did coming out here. D'ye think you can do it?"

"Which shore?" asked Steve, wistfully, as though still indulging in a faint hope he might be allowed to have his own way and cross the pond.

"Back where you came from," said Max, sternly. "I think the ice must be thicker along that side."

"G-g-guess so," admitted Steve.

"Well, pass me by here, and cut out for the shore where Toby is. Go for all you're worth, mind you," Max continued.

"But how c'n I pass you by?" asked the other; "you better go first, Max."

"No, I stick by the board, in case you break in again," replied Max. "Here, you crawl between my legs, like we've done in a cranky canoe. That's the ticket. Now, away you go, Steve."

Steve did not linger to ask any more questions, but struck out boldly for the shore. Nothing happened, even though the thin ice cracked ominously, and swayed under the weight of the boy, whose soaked clothes felt like lead.

Seeing that he was safely ashore, Max also ran to the end of the plank, and then struck out. He took a little different course, and made as good time as the slippery surface of the ice permitted.

"Now," he said, after having safely reached the shore and joined the others, "you get to the cabin in double-quick time. You want to get those clothes off and take a regular old rubdown with a rough towel till you get red all over your body. I'll have some hot coffee ready for you, and between the two I guess you'll shake any bad effects."

Max never reproached Steve after the boy's headstrong ways had brought trouble in some shape down upon his head. He believed in letting the other think it out, and himself realize how foolish he had been.

Steve was fast recovering his accustomed spirits, and even tried to joke over his recent adventure, as they hurried along through the dry woods, upon which not an inch of rain had fallen these two months and more.

"You were right about it, Bandy-legs," he re-

marked. "It is some deep out there in the middle. I proved it, 'cause I must have gone down ten feet, and never touched bottom."

"T-t-told you it was some l-l-late for s-s-swimmin', didn't I?" remarked Toby, who had hold of Steve's left arm, while Max gripped the right, in order to hustle him along, for his clothes were actually freezing on him.

"So you did, Toby, so you did," replied Steve; "but I was such a muttonhead I wouldn't take your word for it. Gee! ain't I glad though Max remembered that old plank! Only for that——"

He did not finish his sentence, but Max felt a shudder pass over Steve, and he hoped the lesson would sink in deeply.

"There's the cabin!" cried Bandy-legs, from in front.

They soon arrived, and Trapper Jim, together with Owen, and a young man named Ed Whitcomb, who lay in one of the bunks suffering from a broken leg, heard the whole story from Bandy-legs and Toby, while Steve was flinging off his stiff clothes and Max starting up the fire in order to procure warmth, as well as a cup of hot coffee.

No one taunted Steve on account of the natural result of his rashness. They were all only too glad that no serious result had followed.

When Bandy-legs and Toby both loudly lauded the prompt action of Max, and the boy at the fire strenuously denied having done anything so wonderful, except exercising a little common sense, Trapper Jim looked fondly at Max and remarked:

"That may be as you say, son; but it's a pity more people haven't got their share of that same common sense. I reckon there'd be a heap of precious lives saved if everybody kept his wits about him in a crisis, and did the right thing."

Thanks to the prompt measures taken, Steve suffered no ill effects whatever from his icy bath. By noon he was as hungry as a shark, and ate more lunch even than Bandy-legs, long noted as possessing the biggest appetite among the chums.

"See here," said Trapper Jim, when Steve passed in his pannikin for a third helping of the squirrel stew they had at noon; "don't you go to swimming right along now, every day. It tones up your appetite too much; and if you kept on, I reckon you'd eat us out of house and home."

That afternoon Steve, to prove that he was all right, went out with his pet double-barreled shotgun to a place where Trapper Jim said he knew quite a number of fat partridges were finding berries on some vines and bushes.

When he came back he proudly showed three fine birds.

"Not so bad for a feller who came near getting drowned this morning, eh, boys?" he asked, but Max saw the shiver that accompanied the words, and believed the lesson would not soon be entirely forgotten.

Bandy-legs was sent off with the two buckets for a supply of drinking water to last over night. He made some humorous remark as he stalked away into the gathering shadows of the coming night. It was to the effect that since they could get water at the spring, it was fortunate they were not reduced to using that of the pond, where Steve had been washing his old clothes.

Those in the cabin were getting supper ready. Toby had taken it upon himself to attend to the fire, which was roaring in a way to make the old trapper look uneasily over toward the boy.

"I don't believe I'd keep her going that way, son," he said, presently; "it sends the sparks flying up the chimney, and they're liable to fall in the woods, which, you know, are as dry as punk just now."

"Listen! What's Bandy-legs shouting?" called out Max.

"M-m-mebbe it's a b-b-bear chasin' him!" suggested Toby.

But all of them could hear the loud cries of Bandy-legs now, for he seemed to be running toward the cabin.

"Fire! Fire! Hurry out, everybody, the woods are afire!"

## CHAPTER III.

### THE FIRE FIGHTERS.

It had come, then, and sooner than even nervous old Trapper Jim had suspected.

The woods on fire meant a startling change in the plans of the boys.

Everybody was thrilled as they caught the full meaning of the words being shouted by Bandy-legs, as he ran for the cabin at the top of his speed.

Then there was a rush for the door.

Possibly the boys expected to see the sky red with a sullen glare. Perhaps some of them fully anticipated hearing the angry roaring of the hungry flames, as they seized upon tree after tree, and made candlewood torches of them.

Nothing of the kind greeted them.

On the contrary, only the gathering darkness did they see at once, though as the light from within dissipated this to some extent, it revealed the figure of Bandy-legs stumbling along close at hand.

Then Max, looking farther, believed that through

the trees toward the east he could glimpse a light.

It was about where the moon might be expected to rise; but then that event would not happen until late on this night, for it was the very last quarter.

Doubtless, then, this was the forest fire Bandy-legs had seen; but it must be a long way off, or very small, to give so little glow.

Trapper Jim, however, went about it the right way in order to secure the desired information.

He captured the excited and panting Bandy-legs.

"Here, open up, son, and tell us where the fire is," he demanded.

"Over near the trail to the spring," gasped the boy.

"In our neck of the woods, then?" continued the trapper.

"Yep, sure! It was eatin' along like a snake. Soon's I saw it I dropped my buckets, and scooted for here," Bandy-legs went on to say, with a touch of pride in his voice.

He thought he had done the only right thing. Another boy, Max, for instance, or even headstrong Steve, would have immediately dashed to the spring, dipped his pails in, and commenced fighting the flames, even while he shouted out the alarm.

Which proves that there may be occasions when too much caution seems to be a poor thing.

"I can see the fire, Uncle Jim!" exclaimed Max; and two more boys echoed his words.

"Same here, lads," declared the trapper. "Lay hold of anything you can find that'll hold water. Everybody come; that is, all but Ed, who'll keep house. We've got to get that fire out, right away, too; because the night wind is beginning to rise, and in ten minutes it might be beyond us. To the spring!"

He kept Bandy-legs with him as he hurried along.

"You must get the buckets for me, son," Trapper Jim was saying. "I hope now you know where you tossed 'em when you ran."

"Right by the spring, Uncle Jim," the boys managed to gasp.

"That's convenient like," added the trapper.

There could no longer be the slightest doubt as to where the fire was. It could be seen eating merrily into the piles of dried leaves that covered the ground under the trees.

All it needed now to set things going at a hurricane rate was a little more time, and the increasing of the night wind.

Meanwhile there had been a grand scene of excitement at the cabin, as the other four boys scrambled around trying to find some kitchen utensil that would hold water.

It happened that the two galvanized pails taken by Bandy-legs when he went for water were the only ones around.

Consequently, searching in vain for buckets, the boys had to content themselves with all sorts of substitutes.

Max galloped off with the largest kettle, used by Trapper Jim when he had a stew to make for the crowd.

Owen got the dishpan.

Steve also armed himself in some fashion, and went booming after the rest, anxious to be in the fray. This left poor Toby, searching in vain for some vessel with which to carry water.

"Where's that foot b-b-bath?" he shouted, as he fell over a pile of stuff that had been pulled out by the boys in their excited search. "I s-s-spoke for that b-b-blessed foot b-b-bath first thing; and I b-b-bet you that Steve w-w-walked away with it."

In despair, as he realized that he was being left out of the game, Toby finally snatched up the first thing he happened to come across, and then hustled out of the door after the rest.

It was a frying pan, the big sheet-iron skillet which Trapper Jim kept for occasions when he wanted to cook fish for a crowd.

Meanwhile Bandy-legs and the old trapper had

managed to reach the vicinity of the fire, and also the spring.

Trapper Jim thought it was very kind and considerate of the blaze to start so near the fountain-head of their water supply.

"Where are the buckets?" he demanded, eagerly; for he could see that the fire was already making considerable headway, and showing signs of being ready to start on a fierce race.

"Here they are!" cried the boy, stepping into the bushes, and immediately reappearing with both pails.

"Take one, and use it!" said Trapper Jim.

Fortunately he had long ago scooped out quite a hole at the spring, and there were several barrels of water held in this.

To dip a bucket in, and then dash toward the fire was with Trapper Jim but the work of a moment.

Bandy-legs was at his heels, eager to fight the flames; because he had always secretly longed to be a fireman, and was determined that when he grew up he would occupy the proud position of foreman to the Atlas Hook and Ladder Company of Carson.

While those two pails of water drowned out the budding conflagration at one point, by this time the fire had spread considerably.

This meant there would be plenty of work for the others, who were by now commencing to arrive on the scene.

Such a picture as that was, with all of them running warmly to and fro, filling their empty vessels, only to dash the contents on the flames, that gradually gave up the ghost before the fierce attack.

When the end had almost been reached, the ranks of the fire fighters received another addition.

"Where's that f-f-fire? Somebody s-s-show it to me. T-t-think I'm going to be c-c-cheated out of my r-r-rights!" cried Toby, hurrying forward.

"Look what he's got, would you—the frying pan full of water!" shrieked Steve, as one last lone tongue of flame rose up, giving them a little light wherewith to see.

Toby stalked deliberately over, and calmly dumped the contents of the big skillet on this last expiring flame.

Intense darkness followed.

"Hurrah!" whooped Toby, "we d-d-did it! There ain't any f-f-flies on us when it c-c-comes to p-p-putting out f-f-fires."

And even Steve had not a word to say in objection.

"Look around right smart, boys," called out Trap-

per Jim, in a relieved tone; "and see if there's even the smallest sputter left."

"Let no guilty spark escape!" called out Owen, as he soused a smoking pile of leaves with the contents of the foot bath—a strange thing to find in a trapper's cabin; but then it must be remembered that Jim Ruggles had once been a college graduate, and knew the value of bathing the tired feet after a long and arduous tramp.

After a little while even Trapper Jim was satisfied that the danger was over.

"How do you reckon she caught?" asked Steve, who had filled one of the pails with fresh water, and was stalking alongside the owner of the cabin, who "toted" the other, while the balance of the boys trotted behind.

"Oh! a big spark from our fire did it," answered Trapper Jim.

Bandy-legs seemed much relieved.

"Glad to hear that, anyhow," he declared. "Because I was afraid it might have been that Ted Shafter and his crowd trying to burn us out."

At this the others set up a roar.

Ted Shafter was a town bully, and an old as well as vindictive enemy to the chums. He had given them more or less trouble during their various camping experiences around Carson. Doubtless, these

things had made so great an impression on the mind of Bandy-legs, he imagined all trouble was apt to spring from the same source, and that Ted Shafter.

"But how do you know a s-s-spark from our c-c-chimblly d-d-did the trick?"

Toby asked this because he felt that in a measure he must be held more responsible than any of his mates for the trouble, because he had been making the fire in the cabin roar so furiously.

"Oh! that's easy, Toby," called out Max. "Just notice how the wind blows, and you'll see that the sparks carry right from the cabin to the spring."

"S-s-say, that's a f-f-fact," admitted Toby.

"Nearly all of 'em die out in the air," continued Max, "but there must have been one big one that held its fire heart. And as luck would have it, that spark fell right in a pile of leaves as dry as tinder."

"We'll have to keep more or less of a lookout all the time we have our fire going, till we get a fall of rain or snow," Trapper Jim remarked.

It had only been a little incident after all, affording the lively chums a chance to show themselves off as fire fighters.

But the affair might have been serious, and went to prove that the fears of the old trapper were not without reason. The whole region was as dry as anything could be, and unless a change came soon

forest fires were bound to devastate the North Woods.

Bandy-legs felt that he deserved special mention, since it was only through his vigilance that the fire was just seen. But for that there was no telling how it might have spread.

Indeed, when the kindly old trapper declared that they certainly had to yield the palm to him as first discoverer, Bandy-legs assumed such airs that Steve had to try and take him down a peg or two.

"Talk about Columbus, would you?" he jeered, "say, he was a has-been compared with the wonderful discoverer we have among us to-day. When we go back to Carson, fellows, let's see to it that we toss Christopher's bust that stands in the park into the junk heap, and replace it with one of the illustrious Clarence."

But all the same, Bandy-legs continued to strut more or less during the balance of that evening. It was not often he found himself in the spot light; and accordingly he felt impelled to make the most of his opportunity.

Occasionally during that evening, when any fresh fuel was thrown on the fire, causing a shower of sparks to fly up the wide-throated chimney, Trapper Jim would step out to observe whether there was any chance of further damage.

"Boys," he remarked to Max and Steve, who were eagerly laying out a two-days hunt they expected to take presently, covering certain territory they were anxious to see before they left the woods, "you understand now what danger lies in leaving a fire burning after breaking camp. A wind might come up and scatter the embers among the dead leaves. That's what starts most fires, and no true hunter would think of quitting his camp without throwing water on the ashes of his fire."

"We'll never forget that, Uncle Jim," declared Steve, really impressed by the wisdom of such a course.

He thought he knew through imagination what a forest fire must be like; but though at the time Steve little suspected the fact, he was fated before a great while to pass through an experience that would indelibly impress it on his mind.

## CHAPTER IV.

### TOBY GETS A PRIZE.

"How about that 'coon trap you set, Toby?"

It was Trapper Jim who asked the question.

They were eating breakfast on the morning after the fire, and, of course, as that recent exciting event occupied so much of their attention, they had no time to think of anything else.

Recently a sly 'coon had been hovering around the cabin, seeking the scraps of food thrown out from time to time.

In fact, the animal had become quite tame, finding that none of the inmates of the cabin seemed disposed to interfere with his playing the part of scavenger. Trapper Jim never bothered any animal like this that seemed inclined to be friendly. He usually fed a number of squirrels, 'coons, and even a red fox all through the winter, because their company seemed to enliven the lonely hours.

Toby had seen the friendly 'coon once or twice

when the dogs barked at the foot of a nearby tree in which the animal had taken refuge.

He admired his sharp nose, his sleek sides, and pretty bushy striped tail, and gradually a desire to make a pet of the 'coon had come to Toby. He would like to take the little animal back home with him.

So, receiving some tips from Max, he had first set out a box, standing it up on end, with some choice bits of food alongside. They were gone the next morning, and Max showed him the plain imprint of 'coon's feet close by, proving who had accepted the bait.

The next night Toby had gone a step farther. The box was tilted over, being held in position by means of a stick. Mr. 'Coon showed no fear, but proceeded to clean up the food left under the box.

Next, Toby made a floor for the box. Even this did not seem to alarm the friendly animal. And as the last stage to the game Toby, under the watchful eye of Max, had cut out a "figure-four" set of sticks, the long one, pointing under the box, being well baited.

Toby jumped to his feet as Trapper Jim said this.  
"I c-c-clean forgot all about it!" he exclaimed, as he ran off.

The others resumed their talk, and quite an ex-

citing discussion was on between Steve and Bandy-legs, who were always at loggerheads, when Toby staggered into the cabin, bearing in his arms the big box.

He had managed to wind a piece of rope around it so that the floor held.

"G-g-got him!" he exclaimed.

"How d'ye know?" asked doubting Steve.

Toby held up his hand, and one finger was seen to be bleeding slightly.

"The little b-b-beggar b-b-bit me."

At that Steve broke out into a laugh.

"Would you believe there could ever be such an innocent, trusting feller as our Toby Jucklin?" he exclaimed. "Think of him putting his hand under the edge of a box and trying to pet a trapped 'coon."

"I wonder he only nipped you," said Trapper Jim. "Shows he's friendly in the start. Some big savage 'coons would have nigh taken a finger off, and that's a fact. Here, let me dose it with permanganate of potash solution, Toby. It's best whenever a wild animal bites or scratches you to make sure the germs are all killed, so blood poisoning won't follow."

"But how will you keep him, now you've got

him?" demanded Bandy-legs, a trifle jealously, for he was also fond of pets.

"Huh! That's all fixed," returned Toby. "Uncle Jim told me how I could make that barrel do, with some strips of wood. He's got a collar and a long thin chain to lend me, too. Mebbe you think I don't know nothin' about these things."

"Listen to him talk, would you?" cried Steve. "Said all that string and never barked once. Hurrah for Toby. Reckon it pays to be a first discoverer. Cures measles, mumps, whooping cough, and lets a feller quit stuttering."

Toby wasted no more time in useless argument.

He had work to do, and was eager to get at it.

The boys carried out the various pelts which Trapper Jim had already secured. These were on stretching boards that could be stood up on end, so the air might gradually dry the skins. But they must not be placed in the sun nor too near a fire, lest they cure too quickly and lose their shape.

As fast as they were in the proper condition they would be removed to allow a fresh skin the use of the thin stretching board.

One pelt in particular Trapper Jim allowed no one to handle but himself, and he was very careful just where he placed it, so that by no possible chance might it become lost or injured.

To the uneducated eye it might only appear as a dark pelt, with something of a silver sheen to it. The tail and head had been carefully preserved, and these indicated that it belonged to the fox family.

This, then, was one of the famous silver fox skins, and Trapper Jim assured his young friends that with anything like good luck he expected to receive from twelve to fifteen hundred dollars for that same skin.

He had known of cases where much more had been paid to the lucky trapper bringing in a royal black fox pelt.

No wonder, then, Uncle Jim, as the boys called him, was so very particular about that beautiful trophy. It represented the highest type of the trapper's art. He had never before secured such a prize.

And it meant even more to Trapper Jim than its money value, for this same pelt had a connection with the presence of Ed Whitcomb at the cabin. At least the young man with the broken leg might have been seen to look with almost loathing upon the precious pelt as Trapper Jim handled it, and then allow his eyes to fill with tears as they rested on the genial face of the trapper himself.

For Ed Whitcomb had been sorely tempted to steal that same pelt, taking the fox from the trap

as he found it. He had gone a long way; then started back toward the cabin, intending to confess his wickedness, when he fell and broke his leg.

Trapper Jim and the boys had found him, and all was forgiven. And when it turned out that Ed was the only child of the woman, now long dead, whom Uncle Jim had once loved as a young man, the bonds of a warm friendship were cemented between the two men. After that Ed Whitcomb would be as a son to the lonely but well-to-do trapper.

Some of the boys always accompanied Jim when he made the rounds of his traps. On this morning, however, recruits were not so numerous as usual.

There were Max and Steve, who wanted to complete all their arrangements for starting out hunting on the next morning.

Owen was still a little lame on account of a sprain he had received lately.

Toby had a whole day's work laid out in making a kennel for his prize, and with the help of the others getting the captive 'coon so that the little leather collar could be placed around its neck.

This left only Bandy-legs.

He declared that if the others all went back on Uncle Jim, he did not mean to desert his best friend. Besides, he wanted to learn a lot more about the curious little muskrats, the sly mink, the audacious

fisher, the nimble, fish-destroying otter, and all the other animals whose skins were fated to be made into beautiful furs that would be worn by lovely ladies.

So Bandy-legs went with Trapper Jim.

Perhaps he did want to pick up some stray crumbs of knowledge; but Max rather believed Bandy-legs might be consumed with jealousy because Toby had captured a pet, while he had none.

He could not bear staying around the camp all day, and watching the others work on his cage for the captured 'coon.

But then Trapper Jim had a way of interesting boys. He rather fancied Bandy-legs, and took especial trouble to arouse his curiosity in connection with the many queer things he knew about animals.

The result was that Bandy-legs by the time he returned to the cabin, which was in the neighborhood of noon, found his resolution wavering. He was seriously debating within his mind whether he had better aim to be the foreman of the Fire Company when he grew up or a trapper like Uncle Jim.

That was a serious matter to Bandy-legs. He had long cherished that idea of being foreman of the Atlas Hook and Ladder Company, and it was hard to displace one idol with another. But after that

morning spent in the company of the old woods ranger his loyalty to the brave fire fighters certainly wavered.

And Uncle Jim had even condescended to say that the boy had all the ear marks that would indicate a successful trapper. This was because he asked a thousand questions concerning the habits of the animals they took out of the traps. For Bandy-legs was noted as one who possessed an inquiring wit. His mother had been heard to say that the first word his baby lips had ever framed sounded like "Why?" And he had been saying it ever since.

Toby, with more or less assistance from his comrades, had succeeded in getting the collar on his prisoner. It took considerable ingenuity to accomplish this and not get bitten.

At noon the 'coon, held by his chain, at which he tugged from time to time, looked angry, and snarled viciously when Bandy-legs went over to the tree to which he was secured, pending the completion of his cage.

"He'll quiet down after a bit when he learns we are his friends, and can give him lots of good things to eat," remarked Trapper Jim.

"'Coons must be a whole lot like boys," remarked Bandy-legs, wisely.

"They are, son," admitted Uncle Jim, nodding his head in approbation.

"They c'n be ugly as sin when the humor seizes 'em," the boy continued.

"Always," commented the other.

"They like good grub," Bandy-legs went on, "and the person that hands it out is the one they admire most. Our cook's the bulliest old girl ever. She knows just how to fetch me every time with her doughnuts and cookies and ginger cake. Yum! yum! don't I wish I had some right now. But old Carson's a long ways off. This is a right smart 'coon, Uncle Jim."

"When he gets tamed he'll make a pretty good pet, though I'd advise Toby to look out and dull his claws some. If he doesn't there may be a red map of Ireland on his face some day."

Bandy-legs walked away, and there was a look of envy in his eyes. He could not see why Toby should have secured such a prize while one who loved animals even more went petless.

But perhaps another 'coon might come around if they left out some scraps. Then, borrowing Toby's trap, he would arrange matters so that when they departed from the cabin in the woods there might be a pair of prisoners to show Carson folks.

Supper time came around.

All the chores of the day had been done, and Trapper Jim could rest with a satisfied conscience, leaving the task of getting the evening meal to some of his young guests.

The boys were enjoying the outing so much that there was never any great difficulty about getting volunteers to do the cooking. And their appetites were, as a rule, so sharp set that they could hardly be held back. Meals would have come about every three hours did they depend wholly upon their sense of hunger to know when it was time to start in with preparations again.

Later on, as usual, Bandy-legs and Steve fell into a heated argument. Steve just loved to be on the opposition side. If some one scoffed at the idea of the moon being made of green cheese, as youngsters are told, Steve was very apt to up and say:

“ Well, now, hold on, perhaps that idea ain’t so far-fetched after all. How d’ye know, now, that it ain’t? Have you ever been to the moon to see? Has anyone? And tell me, do you know green cheese when you see it? ”

This time the argument was about the points of the compass. Steve contended that the cabin faced south of east, while Bandy-legs was equally positive it was north of east.

"I c'n prove it by lookin' up the north star!" exclaimed Bandy-legs, starting up.

"Bah! You wouldn't know Polaris from Sirius, the dog star," jeered Steve.

"I'll show you," flung back Bandy-legs.

He hurried to the door, took down the bar and started to go out. The dogs, lying by the fire asleep, were seen to leap erect with upraised hair. And just then Bandy-legs let out a screech, as he tumbled over some dark object that had been huddled up close against the cabin door.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE BEARSKIN RUG.

“ANOTHER bobcat!” cried Steve, diving into the corner where he kept his gun.

They had had an exciting experience not long before with a bold wild-cat that came prowling around the cabin.

Steve had been lucky enough to have a hand in the slaying of the fierce beast. And the memory of that event haunted him.

But Trapper Jim knew immediately that it was no wild-cat with which the terrified Bandy-legs was rolling in front of the door. The boy had, perhaps more in fright than through valor, clasped his arms tightly about the wriggling object. Doubtless he believed that if he could squeeze the beast hard enough it would be unable to do him any harm. And so Bandy-legs was hugging for all he was worth, shouting at the same time at the top of his voice:

“Take it off me, somebody! Knock him on the head! It’s another bear, and he’s trying to bite me.

Ouch! He did it that time in the leg. No he didn't either. Must have been the dogs. Keep 'em away! Sic 'em on! Somebody do *somethin'*! Want to see me eat up alive! Wow! He's scratching me! Hurry up!"

Trapper Jim had seized the larger dog, Ajax, by the collar, and thrown him back through the open door of the cabin.

"Stay there, Ajax, and you, Don, get away, you little fool!" he called out, in a stern tone that the dogs knew must command obedience.

"Is it a bear, Uncle Jim?" asked Steve.

"Just what it is, and a little cub at that, coming a-knocking at our door to be taken in and fed. Never knew of such a thing before at this time of year," the old trapper remarked.

Bandy-legs had ears, and in spite of his fright he heard.

"A bear cub," he ejaculated, as though sudden joy was beginning to chase away his alarm, "a cute little bear cub, is it? Well, he's *mine!* I claim him for a pet, you understand, fellers."

"By right of first discovery, I reckon, eh, Bandy-legs?" demanded Steve.

"Sure. Ain't I captured him?" replied the other, still hugging his hairy bundle as hard as he could. "Look at the way I'm holdin' him right now, would

you? Talk to me about your 'coon traps, Toby, they ain't in the same class with me."

"All the same," remarked the laughing Max, "you need some help pretty bad about now. If we left you alone, it'd be a hard thing to tell whether you'd captured the cub or he had got you."

"Lend us a hand, Max, there's a good feller," pleaded Bandy-legs. "I ain't just up in wrestlin' with bears; and this little critter he's some husky, I tell you, now. Throw him down and we'll get a rope around him."

Taking pity on the straining, puffing Bandy-legs, and really anxious to see what the strange waif of the woods looked like, the other boys started to render their comrade the assistance he asked for.

Trapper Jim gave them some sound advice, for he knew all about bear cubs. Consequently a rope soon secured the little fellow, and Bandy-legs was once more allowed the free use of his nearly numb arms.

He dusted himself off proudly as he arose with the air of a victor.

"My bear cub!" he kept repeating, as though he wished to impress this fact so thoroughly on the minds of his companions that there could no doubt of it ever arise to disturb his right of sole possession.

The cub snarled and acted ugly whenever any of

the boys approached too close, but Trapper Jim knew how to appease the little stranger.

He poured some condensed milk into a pan, added water to it, and pushed this close to the cub. Immediately the bunch of bristly black hair began to sniff around, and poking his nose into the sweet milk he started to soak it in savagely.

"Pretty hungry, poor little orphan," said Trapper Jim, with compassion in his voice.

Max looked at him quickly, as though a thought had flashed into his mind.

"You never had a bear cub come to your door before and ask to be taken in, did you, Uncle Jim?" he observed.

"I never did," the other replied.

"And I rather think this is a mighty unusual time of year for there to be a cub around at all; ain't that so, too?" asked Owen, falling back on his book knowledge.

"First time I ever met up with a cub with winter coming on," Trapper Jim admitted.

"But whatever made him do it?" Owen continued.

"Huh, that's easy!" put in Steve, with a laugh.

"Then you tell us!" demanded Trapper Jim.

"Why, the little rascal must 'a' known Bandy-legs here wanted to adopt him. And he could tell a soft

snap when he saw one. That's the only reason I know why he wandered this way," Steve explained.

"There's another one, though, Steve, and both you and I have had something to do with it," said Max, soberly.

"What's that?" ejaculated the headstrong boy; "how could I have had anything to do with this cub coming around?"

Trapper Jim only chuckled, but said nothing. It pleased the old man to see Max so well able to solve these problems connected with woodcraft and the secrets of wild animal life.

"I'll tell you then why the cub came," Max went on. "It was because he had been given the faculty of scent, even as a cub."

"Now you *have* got me all mixed up," muttered Steve. "Sure you can't mean he smelled Bandy-legs here."

"Get out!" snorted that individual, resentfully. "What d'ye take me for, a scent factory?"

"Tell us what you do mean, Max?" asked Owen, still groping in the dark.

"And among all the scents which this cub had learned to know," continued the other, smilingly, "one stood out far above all the rest. It was the distinctive odor of his mother's shaggy coat."

He pointed as he spoke to a nearly fresh bearskin that stretched on a frame rested against the cabin wall, having been carried inside by Steve himself at sundown, because he felt a proprietary interest in it.

Steve's mouth opened in his astonishment.

"Gee whittaker!" he exclaimed; "d'ye mean to tell me that bear you'n me shot after it'd gobbled up all the fish our chum had caught in the pond was the mother of this poor little cub?"

"Just what she must have been," asserted Max. "Look at the little fellow now. He's finished his milk, and he's sniffing at that skin on the frame. That tells the story, Steve."

"But we didn't see him around?" ventured Steve.

"No, he must have been in the brush somewhere," Max went on.

"And he's gone hungry, poor little chap, ever since," Steve continued.

"I guess he has; unless he's learned how to chew some roots that bears like, or eat some dried berries that still hang on the partridge bushes. I reckon he was pretty well starved, though."

Warm-hearted, impulsive Steve immediately stepped over to the table and emptied the can of condensed milk into the pannikin.

He was trying to make amends the best way he could for his part in making the cub an orphan.

"Good-by to milk in our coffee," remarked Owen. Steve turned on him like a flash.

"I'll do without it only too willingly," he declared. "And I'm sorry now I helped kill that mother bear. You said it was my pelt, boys, all right," and snatching it off the stretching frame he threw it down, hair side up, alongside the cub. "There, I can't give you back your mammy, but anyhow you're going to cuddle down against her warm hide every night, poor baby."

And Trapper Jim turned his head away to hide a tear in his eye as he heard Steve say this. He was proud of the boy who, in spite of his headstrong disposition, could betray the fact that a warm, generous heart beat within his breast.

"But how would he know the hide was here?" asked Bandy-legs.

"Well, we've had it out in the air all day," Max said, "and I guess he got track of it. The only thing that surprises me is about the dogs."

"You mean why they didn't tackle the little chap if he came prowling around," remarked the trapper. "I've been trying to figure it out myself. Seems to me they were doing more or less barking late this afternoon out in the woods."

"Yes, and you called them in," declared Owen.

"And scolded them for wasting all that time bark-

ing at a 'possum or a 'coon they'd treed," Steve remarked.

"Must have been the cub," said the trapper; "he's big enough to climb up into the crotch of a tree and look down at the dogs. And after I talked to 'em the dogs were ashamed to go out again. Yes, that must be the way it happened."

"Anyhow, he took to me, just like I did to him," observed Bandy-legs, proudly.

"Well, it looked that way," Steve remarked. "Leastwise you hugged like long-lost brothers. And he left his trademark on your cheek, a nice love scratch. You're welcome to the baby bear, Bandy-legs. But I'm wondering what your folks at home'll say when you fetch him along for a star boarder."

"Our cook's got a fine, generous heart," said Bandy-legs, reflectively. "I rather think she'll take to my new pet. And," he added, "what she says goes in our house, you know."

Gradually the excitement attending this unexpected addition to the household died out. The cub settled down on the bearskin that Steve had expected to have made into a rug some day and went to sleep.

Max and Steve had about completed their arrangements for the long hunt upon which they ex-

pected to start in the morning. They had even done up some packages of food, as it was their intention to make an early beginning, because of the desire to cover a great deal of ground.

Besides this they meant to carry a camp hatchet, plenty of matches, and a small frying pan, as well as a coffee pot built for two.

Blankets they would have to do without for one night, possibly a couple. Their guns and ammunition would be all they could carry during the trip. Besides, if they were successful in their hunt they might have to bring back some venison.

Max declared that the main object of the trip was to see the country more than to secure game. But Steve shook his head at this. The hunting instinct was being strongly developed in Steve. He was like Oliver Twist, and always calling out for "more."

Everything was arranged by the time they lay down to sleep, the dogs having long since been secured in their kennels outdoors.

"And to-morrow," said Trapper Jim, "you and me must get busy, Mr. Bandy-legs, knocking together some sort of a shelter for Nicodemus. I never yet slept with a bear, and I rather object on general principles."

Bandy-legs had given the cub that name, and

when they asked him why he called the little stranger Nicodemus he had naïvely replied:

“ Why, you know, he came to us in the night.”

That piece of smartness on the part of Bandy-legs, usually considered rather dull, about took Steve's breath away. He even hinted that the world was going to be turned upside down pretty soon at the rate Bandy-legs was getting along.

“ Another thing,” remarked Trapper Jim, grimly, “ this here pet business has got to the limit, I guess. Pretty soon we'll have a regular old menagerie around here, keeping hard-working fellows awake nights. And say, they'll clean us out of all the supplies we've got. Promise me not to bring a tame deer home, Max; and you, Steve, don't look up a young bobcat, a panther cub, or a wolf that's strayed over the Canada border, looking for Yankee venison.”

“ Do you ever really have wolves around here? ” asked Steve, immediately interested.

“ Some winters, yes,” replied Trapper Jim. “ Time was when they used to be as plenty as blackberries. Many's the time I've heard a pack chasing a deer in the moonlight of a winter's night. But that was long ago. It is a rare thing now to meet up with one or two hungry timber wolves, and a pack, never.”

The cub kept them from enjoying very sound sleep that night. Occasionally the little fellow would whine, just like a baby. Perhaps he wondered why there was no response on the part of the mother bear. Perhaps he was still hungry.

But no one complained. Steve would have surely been the first to put up a protest against this sort of thing under ordinary conditions. But Steve was "muzzled" now, as Bandy-legs called it, for he had a sensation of guilt in his boyish heart.

## CHAPTER VI.

### STARTING ON THE LONG HIKE.

It was rather a long night to all of them.

Besides being kept awake at times by the bear cub's fretting and sniffing around at the unresponsive shaggy coat of its late mother some of the boys had things on their minds that caused them to think more or less.

Max and Steve, of course, could not keep from speculating concerning their coming trip, and wondering whether anything in the shape of adventure would mark their long tramp.

Then there was Bandy-legs, planning great things concerning the time when he would install his new pet in the big empty dog kennel in the back yard. In imagination doubtless he could see all the boys of Carson flocking to the Griffin home, anxious to hear the strange story of how the orphan baby bear came knocking at Trapper Jim's cabin door, almost begging for a chance to nestle once more close to

the warm furry coat that had always been its refuge since birth.

And, Toby, no doubt he was also laying plans in connection with the 'coon that he had trapped. Perhaps in due time other things might follow, until he and Bandy-legs could open a regular circus of trained animals, from jumping fleas to elephants that walked a tight rope and danced the Highland fling—and about that time Toby dropped off to dream of still stranger things.

But now it was morning.

Nicodemus was wide awake. He had his little snout elevated and in direct line with the closet, too, where Trapper Jim kept all his stores.

"Say, tell me, will you, that he don't know where that sweet milk came from?" exclaimed the delighted Bandy-legs; "he's got a bee line on it, and is calling for more in his smart baby bear way."

"Well," remarked Steve, impatient for things to move along, so he and Max could get an early start; "suppose you coax him outside now, Bandy-legs. We don't mind the bear odor while we sleep, but we do draw the line on mixing it with our breakfast."

The owner of the cub could not budge the little beast unaided. Nicodemus strenuously objected to being thrown out.

"He likes it in here, that's what," said Bandy-legs.

"So do we," snapped Steve. "That's why we object to bears under our feet."

"Then give me a lift with him," suggested the other.

"Sure I will," was the prompt reply of Steve; "but only on condition that you give me the choice of pushing or pulling."

"Why, of course," said Bandy-legs, "as if it made any difference."

"All right," cried Steve, promptly; "give me the rope. You get behind and push like everything. We'll budge Nicodemus right smart."

"But don't you let him turn on me!" exclaimed Bandy-legs, suspiciously. "I've had one tussle with the little rascal. And one is enough for me."

"I'll keep a tight line, don't you be afraid, Bandy-legs; lay down to your part of the job now."

Between the pushing and the hauling the obstinate little animal was finally induced to vacate the corner of the cabin where he had been installed. And Trapper Jim would make sure that he never came back again.

"Thank you, Steve," said Bandy-legs, when he had securely fastened the rope around a tree; "and you ain't the one to go back on your word, I hope."

"Course I ain't," replied Touch-and-Go Steve; "what makes you say that?"

"You promised him, you know, Steve," the other went on, insidiously.

"What?"

"That he could have his mammy's warm pelt to sleep against every night; leastways, that's the way it sounded to me, Steve."

Steve looked pained. Then his eyes glittered and his teeth shut with a snap.

"And I'll keep my word, even to a poor little bear cub, Bandy-legs," he said, grimly. "Now, I did mean to have that skin made into a rug. But any old bearskin would answer my purpose. Perhaps now I could buy the one Trapper Jim's got, even if I didn't have a hand like you did in getting the same. But no other could take the place of that skin with that cub."

"Thank you again, Steve; I won't forget," said Bandy-legs.

"But the chances were he was not half able to comprehend the magnanimous action of the headstrong boy. For Bandy-legs and Steve were hardly made out of the same kind of clay. One did not resemble the other any more than the thoroughbred satin-skinned racer follows the line of the plow animal. And yet they are both horses.

Breakfast was soon being made ready.

It was not yet sun-up, and the autumn woods looked rather gloomy. When the bright golden sun appeared, however, doubtless they would take on a different aspect.

Trapper Jim would not hear of the two hunters starting out before they had first secured a good warm feed.

"I always made it a practice," he observed, "to get a warm breakfast in winter, even if I had to eat cold stuff the rest of the day. After sleeping, the whole machinery kind of runs down, you see. And you feel shivery and out of sorts. That's when something warm tones your system up. A cup of hot coffee makes you feel like you could about whip your own weight in wild-cats, so to speak."

The boys never forgot that, and many other wise words Trapper Jim spoke while they were in his company.

When a man has roughed it in the woods, winter and summer, for thirty or forty years, much of the time alone, he learns many things through bitter experience. And those who come after will do well to benefit by the knowledge that came to him only through hard knocks.

Toby in his desire to make friends too quickly with his pet 'coon received another little playful

tap that left three red lines down the back of his hand.

Having been duly warned concerning the danger that might follow, he made a rush for the medicine shelf, and came away with the back of his hand painted a purplish hue, thanks to the solution of six per cent permanganate of potash.

"Keep that up," mocked Steve, "and you'll look like a Fiji Island cannibal pretty soon, Toby. Just try to kiss your pet, and he'll decorate your cheeks and your noble brow for you. Then, when you've daubed some of Uncle Jim's war paint on, I advise you to keep close to the cabin."

"Why?" demanded Toby, his curiosity aroused by the air of deep mystery which Steve managed to throw about his words.

"Because," continued the other, blandly, "Max and myself might be coming along on our return from the hunt. And if you suddenly jumped up, looking like that, we'd just naturally take you for the ring-tailed baboon of the Sumatra wilds. Of course the mistake wouldn't matter so much, you know; but then think of our remorse when we found that we'd slain our noble pard. So, Toby, be warned in time. It's an awful thing to daub your face like you have your hand, and then start into the woods."

"Oh, not much d-d-danger," Toby asserted, hardly knowing whether the other meant all he said or was "joshing" him.

"Come to breakfast, everybody," called out Owen.

"Does Steve get milk for his coffee?" asked Bandy-legs, as they proceeded to gather around the table where the bacon sent up its appetizing odors, flanked by a big dish of fried potatoes, done to a turn in that same mammoth skillet which had taken such a prominent part in putting out the forest blaze.

Besides, Trapper Jim had baked a batch of white flaky biscuits in the oven of the wood stove, "as good as mother used to make," and which were a rich nut-brown color on the top and bottom.

"I never use milk in coffee," returned Steve, with a grin.

"Glad we were induced to wait for this, eh, Steve?" remarked Max, as he speared his third biscuit.

"Well, I guess so," replied the other, as he gave evidence of being ready to follow the example set by Max.

"Hey!" called out the slower moving Bandy-legs, "put the brake on, you fellers, and give the rest of the bunch a chance to ketch up. I'm just startin' my second biscuit."

"Then I'm sorry for you, that's all," said Steve,

calmly, as he made his selection, "because I feel equal to as many again. Uncle Jim's to blame, so pitch into him. Didn't he say we two fellers, starting on such a long hike, ought to stow away a double allowance of grub? Well, I'm taking part of your share along."

"Hold on, boys, don't let such a little thing bother you," observed Uncle Jim, playing his favorite rôle of peacemaker. "Perhaps neither of you noticed that I put a second pan of biscuits in the oven when I took this one out. They'll be done in a jiffy. I think I know boys."

"If you don't, then nobody does," declared Max, with a look of genuine affection in the direction of the genial old trapper.

They had come to appreciate Jim Ruggles since coming up to his cabin in the great North Woods as it is given few boys to know the hearts of men many times their age.

Not one of those fine wide-awake lads but who had come to love the warm-hearted trapper. Yes, Jim Ruggles *did* know boys, even though Fortune had denied him the privilege of having any of his own. He had a way of entering into the confidence of lads that quickly opened the citadel of their hearts. And he who has the knack of winning the esteem of boys is one to be envied.

All through the meal they joked each other as usual. Toby and Bandy-legs fell into an animated dispute as to whether 'coons or bears made better pets.

"'Coons are treacherous, ain't they, Uncle Jim?" exclaimed Bandy-legs. "They've got the cat nature every time. No matter what you do for 'em, look out! Just happen to stroke the fur the wrong way once and see how quick they turn on you."

"Sho!" answered Toby, who had one of his good spells on, and could speak as evenly as anyone present; "what about bears, tell me? They'll tear all your clothes, and if you teach 'em to box, take care, that's all, or you'll get a black eye. They fight with all four feet at once. Sho!"

"Now bears is more like dogs, ain't they, Uncle Jim?" Bandy-legs went on, and everybody knew then and there just where he had gotten all his information. "They're more honest, more open and aboveboard than a cat or a 'coon is. Treat 'em well, and they'll act civilized with you. No underhand hitting, no biting when your back's turned, is there, Uncle Jim?"

But wise Trapper Jim, who was enjoying all this talk exceedingly, would not allow himself to be dragged into the affair.

"Settle it yourselves, lads," he said, smilingly; "each of you is right in your way. Bears are good, so are some 'coons—in their places. But I do say," with a suspicious sniff around him, "that neither of 'em has any business being lodged in the cabin of a white man."

And as neither contestant would knuckle down, the question of superiority remains unsettled to this day.

When breakfast had been dispatched, Max and Steve began to get ready to make a start. The others gathered around to see them off. Whatever the day had in store in the way of duties could be postponed for a short time.

"Will we get any rain or snow, do you think, Uncle Jim?" asked Max, as he secured the last package of food in his haversack, which the trapper was to strap on his shoulders.

"I'm dubious about it," replied the other. "San went down red last night again, and that means fair weather generally. Beats all how this thing does hold up. I never saw the equal of this dry spell but once in the thirty-seven years I've been up here in the woods."

"Well, I hope your red setting sun tells wrong for once," Max went on to say. "If we could only get

a soaking rain or a heavy fall of snow I'd be willing to take it without a grumble, I'm that tired of hearing the dry leaves crackle under foot."

"And," spoke up Steve, with a hunter's instinct, "you can't hardly expect to get anywhere near a feeding deer when everything around is so noisy. Yes, I wish it would wet things up some. We'd try and be cheerful. A hollow tree would be a good enough shelter, wouldn't it, Max?"

"As a last word, lads," remarked Trapper Jim, as he shook hands heartily with both boys at the same time, "remember about the dangers of fire. If not to you, then perhaps to some other person. If the forest does have to get a scorching because of this bad condition of things, I want the skirts of your coats to be free of suspicion. I smelled smoke in the air the last two nights, and from that you can just take it from me there's fires raging somewhere!"

The boys shouldered their guns. Max had his repeating rifle, while Steve carried his double-barrel twelve-bore shotgun; so that between them it looked as though they ought to be equal to any emergency that could arise to confront two Nimrods.

"Good-by and good luck!" they heard their chums call out.

On the border of the woods they glanced back to give a last salute to those who watched their departure. And they could not but notice that even the wounded man, Ed Whitcomb, had dragged himself from his lower bunk over to the door to wave his hand after them.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE CAMP FIRE IN THE BIG TIMBER.

“It beats the Dutch all hollow!”

Steve made this remark, which had in it a ring of his usual fretting, because things refused to follow the channels he had marked out.

It was somewhat past noon.

Hour after hour had passed away, with the two sturdy lads tramping steadily onward. Max had taken considerable enjoyment in observing the formation of the land, the swell of the ridges they crossed, as well as the variety and character of the trees that grew in the ravines and along the slopes.

Not so Steve.

His mind when he set out on the long hike had been set upon pretty much one thing, and that was—game.

Max could admire the scenery as much as he pleased, but it did not appeal to Steve just then. If Max called his attention to a magnificent view, as

they stood on the top of a ridge, Steve would just as likely as not grunt and say:

“That’s all true enough, but show me your game.”

When a particularly fine patch of timber opened up, and brought out exclamations of delight from Max, his chum would remark:

“Does look as if we ought to stir up a deer around there.”

Still, up to now, all these fine prospects had failed to materialize for Steve. The mighty Nimrod had seen signs of game several times, such as tracks of delicate hoofs, or even a place where a deer had undoubtedly passed the night, as there were red hairs in the depression; but as yet his eyes had not been gladdened by even a distant glimpse of a running buck.

And so Steve allowed himself to grumble now and then.

Max paid little attention to these rumblings. He was used to them. Just as those who live near a volcano, and for years have daily heard the inward fretting and complaining of the imprisoned forces, give little heed, so Max only smiled when Steve eased things up by “letting off a little steam,” as he himself expressed it.

They had sat down to rest a bit and eat some lunch.

Now Steve liked to satisfy his appetite as well as

the next boy, and that he was hungry now the amount he consumed testified. Still, strange to say, even this did not put him in the best of humor.

"Don't you think it's funny that we haven't scared up anything worth knocking over yet, Max?" Steve presently demanded.

When a plain question was put to him, of course, Max felt compelled to answer. And so, smiling at the other's distressed looks, he remarked:

"Oh, well, it's a little queer; but a hunter has got to take things as they come. You waste breath whenever you complain of the weather, don't you, Steve?"

"Sure, I know that; but this is different, you see, Max."

"How different? Haven't we done our best, and looked right and left for game as we came along? Could anyone beat it? Is there any fault hanging to our actions?" Max went on, thinking it might do Steve a little good if he rather rubbed it in for once.

"Course not," answered the fretful one, readily.

"All right," Max went on, cheerfully. "Now, if we'd gone and got up half a dozen deer, and wasted our ammunition without having anything to show for it, we might be feeling some sore. But up to now, Steve, we can show a clean sheet. We've bagged

everything we fired at, and fired at everything in the way of game we got up."

At this philosophical way of looking at things, Steve grinned.

"P'r'aps you're right, Max," he remarked.

"I know right well I am," declared the other, sturdily.

"Besides," Steve went on, "only half a day is gone, and we expect to stay out two, anyway, and perhaps three."

"That's the way to look at it, Steve," said Max, encouragingly. "Be a sport. You never talk about giving up in a baseball game when the score's against you till the last man's down."

"That's right," Steve declared.

"All right, then," the other went on to say, quickly. "Apply the same rule to your hunting. There's always a chance of getting something or other up to the last minute. Why, Steve, I can remember going out, tramping all day, and never getting a blessed shot. And then, late in the afternoon, almost in sight of the camp, I started a covey of partridges and made a decent bag. If I'd been like you, like as not by that time I'd have been caught off my guard and lost a splendid double shot."

Steve seemed impressed.

"Oh, I know I grumble a whole lot, Max," he ad-

mitted. "I reckon all of my ancestors must have been sailors, or sea cooks, or something of the kind. But all the same, now, I don't mean half I say. When I remark that I don't believe there's any game in this blessed country, all the while I'm looking right and left and my finger is on the trigger."

"Yes," said Max, with a laugh. "In other words, you're just putting on. Your bark is worse than your bite, Steve. I know you pretty well. But stop and remember that right now we're just getting to the country Uncle Jim said he believed we'd find game in."

"Why, sure, that's right, Max."

"And it seems to me that stretch over there looks as if we might start up some birds. I can see there are plenty of the dried berries that partridges feed on in the fall and early winter."

Max pointed almost straight ahead as he spoke. And Steve seemed to be so impressed by what his chum said that after one eager look he reached out for his gun.

"If that's so," he observed, "I guess I'd better put some Number Sevens in place of the buckshot shells I've been toting around in hopes of a deer. A brace of fat partridges wouldn't be so bad."

"Just what I'd like for our supper to-night, Steve. You know we're going to do some backwoods

camping now—no tent, no blankets, and yet try and keep comfortable.”

“ Well, if anybody can do it, I’ll stake my faith on you, Max. There, now bring on your fat birds. I’m in good shape to give ‘em first a right and then a different choked left. If I don’t get anything with two shots, I’m going to ask you to kick me, Max.”

“ Perhaps you won’t have to ask me,” laughed the other. “ But let’s be moving along now. I’m feeling pretty good after that rest and fill-up.”

“ Anyhow, it’s a bully good day for our trip,” remarked Steve, beginning to look around more, and see all they had to be thankful for.

“ Couldn’t be finer; though Uncle Jim wants to see rain or snow, the worst kind, come along. He worries about the forest fires.”

“ He sure has that on the brain, now,” assented Steve. “ See how excited he got when a spark began to play with the dead leaves.”

“ Well, Uncle Jim has been through the mill,” said Max, as they started off. “ He came near losing his life once in a fire.”

“ Yes, I remember his saying so, though he wouldn’t tell the story, Max.”

“ He told me about it,” the other remarked. “ You see, he doesn’t like to think of that terrible time.”

"Shucks! I didn't know he got such a bad scare as that, Max."

"It wasn't altogether the scare," said Max. "Uncle Jim lost a friend in that forest fire. They were separated in the excitement. Uncle Jim managed to get to water and escape. His friend's body was found afterwards, for he had been caught in a fire trap and lost his life. So the thought of a forest ablaze always makes old Jim remember."

"Oh, that was terrible, sure enough," Steve remarked.

Then the two lapsed into silence, as they were now approaching the place which looked favorable for birds according to the practiced eye of Max.

Suddenly there was a roar. Half a dozen partridges that had been sunning themselves on a little rocky slope close by went whirling off like so many cannon balls.

There is always something about this noisy whir of wings calculated to startle even the experienced hunter.

Max gave vent to an exclamation. With his rifle he instantly and instinctively covered one of the fleeing partridges, but of course he did not fire.

There was a quick shot, however, and down plumped the very bird Max had his eye upon. Bang! went Steve's second barrel, and instantly a second

partridge headed lower, presently striking the ground.

Max gave a shout.

"Splendid work, Steve!" he cried in delight, "you've got the hunter's eye, all right. There's our supper waiting for us."

"I hope neither of 'em get away," remarked Steve, anxiously.

"No danger of that," returned the other; "they hit the ground with a thud, as only dead birds can. That little Marlin always was a hard shooter. That's why I wanted you to carry it in place of your own gun."

"She's a jim-dandy gun," said Steve, enthusiastically, as he replaced the fired shells with fresh ones.

The two birds were easily found. They frightened off a bold red fox when they hunted for the second one. Undoubtedly he had seen it drop, and, undaunted by the report of the gun, had been advancing to make way with his dinner when the boys broke in on him.

"Well, things are picking up," said Steve.

"We're doing the picking up," laughed Max, as he examined his prize. "They're in prime condition, too."

No more partridges were seen, and after a while

Steve once more changed back to the buckshot shells, hoping to start a deer.

But the afternoon wore away, the woods grew more dense than ever, and Max was delighted with the looks of things; but it began to seem as though they would get no deer that day.

"But it's all right," said Max; "we wouldn't want to shoot one without making use of, and just think of us packing fifty pounds of venison over the distance we expect to cover to-morrow."

"I reckon you're right," admitted Steve, with a sigh. "But how about making camp, old fellow?"

"Just going to say we might as well stop here as any place," was the reply Max made. "The sun is only an hour high, and once he drops out of sight it'll get pitch dark in the woods here mighty quick."

"And I reckon we've got a heap to do. Say when, Max."

"Right here is as good a place as any; and I see just the right kind of half-green stuff around that we want for our lean-to."

So the guns were laid aside temporarily, the packs deposited beside them, and both boys set to work.

The camp hatchet was used vigorously by each in turn. By degrees Steve saw that his experienced campmate was building a sloping platform of the half-green bushes and branches, helped out by some

stout canes that had been growing in a little swale close by.

In the back this was some two feet from the ground, while in front it was almost double that. Max contrived to bank up the back pretty ingeniously, for he had made use of a big log that served this purpose. Even the sides were fairly well screened.

When half an hour had gone by they had a splendid substitute for a tent, such as experienced hunters often make to shield them from frost, dew, or wind.

"I even believe it'd shed rain!" declared the enthusiastic Steve, who had never before seen one of these shanty shelters made.

"It might for a time," admitted the architect, "but worse luck, as Uncle Jim would say, there's mighty little chance of the test being made. But it will keep the cold wind off us while we sleep, and that means a lot when you miss the warm blankets you're used to."

"I suppose the fire comes next?" remarked Steve.

"Yes," assented Max, "while the daylight lasts we'd better lay in a good supply of wood. Because to-night we want to keep the fire going right along. It will be pretty cold."

"I reckon that ice on the old pond will hold all right by the time we get back," Steve remarked.

"Well, I declare," laughed Max, "you'd break your heart if you didn't get a chance to walk across that pond before you went home. But let's drag a lot of this firewood up so we can chop a supply."

"The fire, of course, is to be made in front of the shanty," Steve observed.

"Yes, and the sloping roof inside holds the heat," the other explained. "You wait and see how comfy it feels. I've slept in one just as well as if I had blankets. Only a fellow has to take cat naps of an hour or less, because it's necessary to keep the wood going on the camp fire."

When they had a large supply of wood made ready darkness was settling over the timber.

"Gee! it's going to be black as pitch," said Steve, as he handed over the bird he had been preparing for cooking.

"If we had the big frying pan along," Max remarked, "I'd put a few slices of this salt pork in it and fry these birds the nicest you ever saw. But we'll manage to get on, I guess, as it is."

He inserted small pieces of the breakfast bacon here and there in slits he made. This would serve to cook them to a delicious brown. Then Max constructed an ingenious rough and ready spit, upon

which the two birds were impaled and brought up close to the hot coals of the fire. This could be turned, of course.

Meanwhile Steve got the coffee started.

Some time later a most delightful odor began to arise.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Steve, "the coffee's done, and I hope the birds are near being ready. Don't see how I can stand it much longer."

"You won't have to. Give 'em five minutes more. And, Steve, you might start in with some of these cold biscuits. They'll take the edge off your appetite and get you in good shape for the main dish."

"Guess I will. Say, this coffee looks great. And how lucky I learned to take mine clear. Give that farther bird another turn, would you, Max? They look brown enough to do, and the smell just makes my mouth water. Um! um! ain't I glad we started up that covey, though."

"And wasn't it lucky you didn't have buckshot in your gun at that time, Steve?"

Exchanging remarks in this jolly way the two chums finally settled themselves alongside under the shelter of the forest-made shack. Each had one of the partridges; and Steve, wild to begin work, had just managed to twist off one of the legs, which he

was in the act of raising to his lips, when suddenly a strange sound came stealing out of the woods.

It was evidently at some little distance away, yet so clear was the frosty night air that it came distinctly, as though proceeding from a point close by.

"Great governor! what was that, Max?" burst out Steve. "Sounded a whole lot like a farmer's dog baying the moon, only there ain't any farms around here; and as to the moon, nixey!"

"I don't know," said Max, slowly, "that is, positively; but between you and me, Steve, I rather think that queer old sound was what they speak of as the long-drawn howl of a timber wolf."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### UNDER THE WHISPERING PINES.

"Wow!" said Steve, excitedly, "and again, wow! That sounds gamey enough to suit me. Oh, don't I hope there's a pack of the critters, and that they'll just give us a chance to bag the lot!"

Max smiled at the words of his chum. But then he knew well enough that Steve really meant every word he spoke. He had his faults, but they were not those of a boy who says one thing and means another.

After munching away steadily for a little while, and apparently enjoying the taste of the partridge, which was cooked "to a turn, and by a turn," as Steve said, apparently the fact that no second howl followed disturbed Steve, for he remarked:

"Hope that pesky old wolf hasn't hauled off now. He's keeping mighty quiet. Say, where aways did it seem to come from, Max?"

The other appeared to have no doubts on that score, for without hesitation he pointed past the fire.

which had been so built that the smoke did not enter their shelter, but was borne away.

"H'm! that's down the wind, ain't it?" pursued Steve.

"It sure is," replied the other.

"I say, Max, a wolf has got a better nose than a boy, much better, hasn't he? And I think, if I was *awful* hungry, I could smell these birds a long ways off, if I happened to be down the wind, eh?"

"That's a dead sure thing, Steve," answered Max, seeing the drift of what his chum had in mind.

"Well, then, like as not that wolf got a whiff or two. No wonder he howled at the idea of being left out in the cold. I'd just sit up and howl, too, if I knew I didn't get an invite to dinner, and had to take it out in smelling."

Then Steve ate on for a while, grunting in his delight. Presently he looked up again.

"Say, Max, p'r'aps it'll coax the old feller around," he remarked. "Don't see how he can ever hold out against it. And, let me tell you, I mean to sleep with one eye open to-night."

"Which eye?" demanded Max, soberly. "I'd ought to know, so if I happen to notice you're using the wrong one, I could wake you up, and get you to change around."

"No joking, Max," said Steve. "I'd really and

truly like to shoot a genuine wolf. I've heard and read so much about the fierce critters, it'd please me the worst kind to have the skin of one I'd bagged."

"I hope you get the chance, then," his comrade remarked, as, having finished picking the bones of his bird he gave them a toss to the farther side of the camp fire.

"What'd you do that for?" asked Steve, quick to see that Max had avoided throwing the carcass of the partridge into the fire.

"It might coax your game to drop in on us," laughed Max. "You do the same with the other rack. Wolves are pretty daring, I understand, and will creep up close to a smoldering fire if they smell food."

"That sounds good to me," declared Steve. "It'd be quite a feather in my cap, now, if I could only bag a real wolf. They say they're seldom seen around these parts, and for a tenderfoot to get one would be some pumpkins, now."

"It would, for a fact, Steve; and here's hoping you get your chance, though I rather think it isn't often hunters want wolves to come around. Most of the time it's just the other way."

"Where d'ye s'pose that feller came from?" asked Steve.

"Uncle Jim says that wolves don't stay around here any longer," was what Max replied. "And if that's the case, then all they see must come over from Canada, where there's lots of the critters."

"An immigrant, eh?" chuckled Max, "well, ten to one he slipped in past the customs officers without having his baggage examined. That ought to condemn him on the spot, we've got enough foreigners in this country already."

Thus chatting and joking they finished supper.

No second long-drawn howl disturbed the solemn silence of the night. Owls could be heard at intervals, but the boys were so familiar with their hooting they paid little or no attention to the mournful sounds.

"But because he don't toot his bugle any more don't mean he mightn't be heading up this way, I calculate," Steve remarked, showing that his thoughts must have been ranging along those lines.

"For your sake I hope he is," Max said, laughingly. "They're smart as a steel trap, I understand. Why, right now, Steve, how do we know but what a wolf is watching every move we make?"

Steve started at this, and looked quickly toward his gun.

"Yes, I've got the buckshot in there, all right," he remarked, as though he found considerable consola-

tion in that fact. "And if I ever get a chance to draw bead on Mr. Wolf, it'll be good-by for him. But I say, Max, you don't happen to glimpse any yellow eyes around, starin' out of the dark, do you?"

"Not just now," replied the other, "but there is one thing I have been noticing."

"What?" demanded Steve.

"Look through the trees yonder down the wind," Max continued. "The timber is pretty dense, but through it all you can see something of a glow in the sky, can't you, Steve?"

"That's right, Max."

"It's caused by a forest fire that must be burning away off there," Max went on; "Uncle Jim was right. This dry weather has been a mighty bad thing, and like as not right now there may be half a dozen fires up in the North Woods section."

"Glory be! that sounds serious like, Max."

"It will be serious for those who happen to get caught in the track of those fires. Especially," Max added, "if the wind should happen to get up and blow half a gale. Right now it's almost quiet; and Uncle Jim says fires don't worry folks much unless there's a big wind."

"But we don't need to bother about that one,"

Steve ventured, "because we happen to be to the leeward. It couldn't work up this way."

"Not unless the wind changes," Max remarked.

Later on they made all preparations looking to passing as comfortable a night as possible. Max first of all built up the fire, so that it would last fairly well. He knew, however, that as they needed warmth all through the night, and that wood does not last very long, he would have to be up every hour or so in order to replenish the blaze.

Steve was making his arrangements.

They had managed to build up something of a bed of leaves and such things that would in a measure take away from the hardness of the ground. And Steve, mindful of what he had said about keeping one eye open and his gun handy, chose the side of the shelter which he deemed more convenient for his purpose.

"Going to turn in now, Max?" he asked, yawning, for looking into the fire after a hearty meal and following the day's walk had made Steve both tired and sleepy.

"Guess I might as well," came the reply. "Fire's fixed, and there's nothing else to be done now."

"What's the time?" asked Steve, snuggling down, contentedly, because he knew Max would take care

of things, good old reliable Max, upon whom all the other chums depended so much.

"Just nine," answered the other.

"Huh! wake me early, mother dear, because to-morrow won't be the first of May. Hope that wolf comes nosing around. Say, I'm just as warm as toast, and this is the bully thing."

That was the last Max heard from his comrade until his heavy breathing told that Steve was sound asleep. Even his hope of bagging a real Canadian wolf had not kept him awake.

With Max it was different. He dozed and woke up, and dozed again. When the fire needed attention at such times as he awoke he would crawl out and do the right thing without Steve ever being disturbed.

Steve lay on his back and seemed to be sleeping soundly. Yet Max noted with a smile, when the light of the revived fire allowed him to see, that the boy's gun lay close beside him, his right arm resting in such a way that his hand could clutch the weapon at the slightest warning.

Apparently Steve had his ideas as to what was meant by "sleeping on his arms"; and though Max could detect neither of his eyes open, he believed Steve was all right.

The night wind had arisen and was growing

stronger. It made strange music through the tops of the tall pines. But such sounds were soothing whispers to one who knew them of old. They would lull Max to sleep rather than keep him awake.

Once more his senses grew heavy. That music of the whispering pines was the last he remembered hearing ere he slept.

The awakening was something in the nature of a shock.

It seemed to Max as though in his dreams there came a shrill screech. He sat bolt upright to find Steve doing the same.

A shower of sparks met his vision. Two indistinct forms seemed to be mixed up in a struggle. As he looked they separated, each bolting in a different direction.

And just then came the crash of Steve's gun.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE FOREIGN INVADER.

“Whoop! got something that time!”

Steve let out this shout as both boys scrambled from under their shelter. The camp fire had been scattered right and left. In a score of places red embers were already starting small fires among the dead leaves and stuff with which the whole surface of the ground was carpeted.

These, fanned by the rising wind, would soon be joining together, and almost before one could believe it possible a billow of flame would be leaping on through the timber belt.

In such easy ways do destructive forest fires have their beginning. There is always a brief time when, by energetic action, they may be easily smothered. But a little delay, and it is too late. Once they reach a certain pitch, a whole army of fire fighters can hardly prevail against them.

Max saw the danger. He knew that a few minutes wasted just then would put them in a hole.

"Quick, get busy, Steve, and trample it all out! The wind's rising, too. Jump in and show what you can do."

Even while saying these energetic words Max was busy. It was all very well to talk, but generally actions speak louder than words. And Steve was not the one to lag behind when there was anything doing.

This way and that the two lads sprang, working their feet industriously, stamping, beating, smothering by any means possible every venturesome little blaze that dared to show its head.

It was no easy task.

Often when Steve thought he had utterly overcome the foe in one quarter, after he had started in to work somewhere else, upon glancing back, he would be amazed and disgusted to see another fiery serpent rearing up in the place he had just left, and this, of course, made it necessary for him to return to complete his work.

But Max, more thorough in his way of doing things, did not have to repeat once. There was that difference in the two boys.

But they were gradually getting the better of the numerous little plague spots. One by one these grew fewer. And if they blazed a little brighter, Max felt a confidence that under such a fierce attack as

he and Steve had started they were bound to get the whip hand of the fires.

Even the gathered leaves under the lean-to started to burn, showing that one of the widely scattered sparks must have been thrown in there. Max, discovering this new danger just in time, threw himself afresh into the fray, and had that threatening house-warming under control in short order.

"All out!" cried Steve, who was by this time nicely warmed up to the fray, and apparently ready to tackle almost anything.

He declared afterwards that he could just feel for poor Alexander the Great weeping for more worlds to conquer.

"Just when I was feeling fit, the measly old fires had to knuckle down and give up the ghost," he complained.

Max was already starting to revive their camp fire. It was pretty cold, and after they had gotten over the excitement they would be apt to feel the tang in the air.

"A good idea," declared Steve, who perhaps was already beginning to shiver as he felt the reaction set in.

He picked out some small wood and passed it along.

"I notice one or two places still smoking, Steve;

better go and give 'em another stamping. We don't want to take any chances," Max observed.

"You bet we don't," was the reply, "and I'm the one who can smash out fires all right, every time."

He came back a minute later, remarking:

"Whoo! that was a great circus all right, Max. Did you hear the shell go off?"

"Shell?" repeated Max, as if puzzled.

"Sure. I must have dropped one, and the fire got to it in time. Then, when she exploded, the whole business blew up. Hey, what're you laughing at, Max? Mebbe, now, you didn't see them sparks rear-ing up on end every which way for Sunday? Looked like a fountain of 'em to me."

"I saw it all, Steve, but you're away off if you reckon that was caused by the explosion of a shell."

"What was it, then?" demanded Steve.

"Well," Max went on, "it puzzled me at first, and I've been thinking about it all the while. I reckon I've hit on the correct answer."

"Let's hear it, Max."

"There were two wolves to begin with," the other declared.

"Two something or other, because I saw 'em run, and then I shot. But go on, Max," urged the im-pulsive one.

"I rather think they must have lighted on those

partridge racks we threw away about the same time. And like a couple of hungry, hot-tempered dogs would do in the same case, these two wolves started to tackle each other."

"To the victor belongs the spoils, eh?" commented Steve, always ready to insert a word or two in order to express his individual opinion.

"That's about the size of it," Max went on, smiling. "Might always rules among dogs and wolves, you know."

"And sometimes among boys, 'specially if they're built on the order of our old enemy, Ted Shafter. But what happened, Max, after they started to grapple?"

"Why, it looks to me as though in their fury and excitement both of 'em fell right into the middle of our fire, which I guess must have been only smoldering at the time, and not blazing."

"Course they did!" cried Steve, as though the idea appealed to him strongly; "fell flop in among those red-hot brands. And that was when they let out such war whoops of yelps. Gracious! but didn't they send the cinders every which way, though? Chances are they got their old hides nicely singed. Served 'em right, too, for comin' nosin' around where they wasn't invited."

"But, hold on, Steve, you're wrong there. You

know we did send out a special invitation for these gentlemen to call around. We handed it to the breeze, and that carried it along until it was delivered all right. More than that even, Steve, we coaxed 'em to come on in by baiting the ground with the remains of our supper."

"That's right," commented Steve; "what d'ye suppose is getting me? Don't seem to remember anything any more. Course we asked 'em to call. And they came all right, didn't they, Max?"

"You got in that snap shot in great shape, Steve," Max went on.

"Didn't I?" echoed the other. "Seemed to me my gun came up to my shoulder of its own accord. But, say, was I mistaken—could my eyes fool me, Max, or did I really drop him?"

"I think you did," replied the other. "But that shower of sparks gave me such a shock I couldn't say for sure."

"I'm going to see, that's right," asserted Steve.

First of all he made sure that his gun was once more in serviceable shape by replacing the empty shell with a full one.

Max meanwhile was working at the fire, so as to disperse the gloomy shadows that had hastened to troop out of their hiding places as soon as the boys had trampled out the numerous new blazes, each of

which would have been the focusing point, if allowed to live, for a gigantic conflagration.

"Want to carry a torch along?" Max asked, as Steve arose.

"Nope. Gun'll be all I want to tackle, I guess."

Steve moved off without the slightest hesitation. He was not much given to fear, even under conditions that might well have caused grown men to feel timid.

"Keep your gun handy," sang out Max, making sure that his own rifle was well within reach. "He might only be wounded, Steve. Or the other one could be lying in wait to attack you."

"No fear for me; I'm all wool and a yard wide," answered Steve.

So he walked steadily forward, heading for the spot where he believed he had seen some big animal leap wildly into the air when he discharged the right barrel of his gun.

"Say, blessed if I can see him," he called out; "must have fooled me."

"More to the left, Steve; you're away off your base," called Max.

Then presently he heard the other talking to himself.

"Find anything?" asked Max.

"Oh, yes, he's here, all right, and as dead as Julius

Cæsar. But shucks, after all, Max, they were only a couple of half-wild hungry dogs!"

"Sure of that?" demanded the other.

"Looks like a dog, all right. Perhaps they're wild dogs, though. He does seem to have a nasty appearance. And he's got fangs to beat the band."

"Suppose you lug him over here to the fire!" called Max. "Let's have a look at your runaway farm dog, Steve."

Steve readily complied. He held his gun in one hand, using the other to do his pulling. And in this way he presently deposited the dead beast before his comrade.

Max took one look at the gaunt gray form, with its hair scorched in spots from recent contact with the hot embers of the fire. He bent down to examine the cruel-looking head, with its short ears and glistening teeth. Then, with a broad smile, he remarked:

"There's your Canada immigrant; it's a sure enough timber wolf, all right."

## CHAPTER X.

### TROUBLE IN THE AIR.

STEVE looked very much pleased.

"Dead sure of that, are you, Max?" he asked.

"I am," replied the other.

"Because I wouldn't feel very smart trying to pass off the skin of a measly old barnyard kiyi for a genuine Canada wolf," Steve went on.

"You can believe me, all right, Steve," Max insisted. "And it's a pretty good pelt, too. Those few little burnt patches won't cut much figure when once a rug man has made it up for you."

"That's where he got his medicine, eh, when his brother upset him into our camp fire," Steve observed. "Oh! wasn't that some circus, though, and don't I wish now I'd just seen the whole game from Alpha to Omega. But I'm glad they came. No damage done to us, anyhow. And, Max, believe me, I don't think they got the bait after all."

"Well, since we don't want any more wolves coming around to-night, I'm going to toss those par-

tridge skeletons in the fire. One prize ought to satisfy your wolf appetite, I should think, Steve."

"It'll have to. Besides, a wolf ain't a very pretty beast. But how will we do about the old fellow's pelt, Max?"

"Have to take it off, to be sure," was the reply.

"Then you'll have to undertake the job, because I'm a greenhorn when it comes to anything like that," Steve suggested.

"No great trouble about that, once you know how," declared Max, as he drew his sharp-edged hunting knife.

"What, not now, I hope!" the other exclaimed.

"I don't know what's to hinder, Steve."

"But—we want some more sleep. Seems to me I've only had a little bit of a nap."

At that Max laughed.

"Every time I got out to fix the fire you were snoring away. It was a pretty hunky old nap you took, Steve," he said.

"Fix the fire!" echoed the other.

"That's right, Steve."

"Do you mean to tell me you climbed out and built up the fire without my even knowing a thing about it?" demanded the surprised chum.

"Not only once, Steve, but seven times. I give you my word on it," declared Max.

Steve stared, as though he could not believe his ears. It seemed to him, just as he said, that he had dropped asleep, enjoyed a short session, and was then rudely awakened by the sudden clamor.

"Seven—times!" he echoed, feebly.

"It may have been eight, I'm not quite sure," Max went on. "But you slept through it all as sweet as a baby. Shows how careful I was about crawling in and out, don't it?"

"Then it must be pretty late," suggested Steve.

"You're wrong again, my boy—you mean pretty early," laughed the other, taking out his nickel watch and letting his chum see. "After five right now, you notice. What's the use of going back to bed? I might as well get the hide off this old terror of the Canada woods. By then it'll be time to start breakfast, because morning will be along."

"Morning!" repeated Steve. "By jinks! I guess it's coming right now with the sun rising over there."

"Look again, Steve. Since when has the sun started to rising in the south? That glow you see is the effect of the same old forest fire we noticed last night. And as the wind is getting fresher right along, I reckon there'll be some lively doings down yonder before another sunset."

"Unless it rains," commented Steve, watching the deft way in which the other went about the job of

removing the hide of the unlucky Canada wolf that had been "toled" to their camp by the appetizing odors borne on the breeze, only to meet a doubly warm reception.

"Unless it rains," Max echoed, "which we hope, for everybody's sake, it will do."

And yet, when making this generous wish, the boy did not dream of what a deep interest he and his boon companion would themselves have in its realization before the setting of another sun. Coming events do not always cast their shadow before. There may be times when the sun or moon is almost directly overhead. And in that event there can be no shadow at all.

Max finished his job, and remarked again that if properly cured the wolf pelt ought to make up into a very good rug.

"You tore quite a hole through both sides," he said, "with that charge of buckshot, but it can be remedied easily enough. But how about that coffee?"

"It's coming along, all right, Max. And there's a chill in the air that'll make it ta te doubly good right now. There, it's begun to boil like fun. Guess we'll be ready to have a bite soon."

"Pretty early for breakfast," remarked Max.

"But there is dawn setting in, this time for keeps,"

and Steve pointed as he spoke directly toward the east.

The darkness had been gradually giving way to the gray of early morning; and there in the sky, as seen through the woods, they could catch a rosy flush that gathered force with every passing minute.

Steve might be hoodwinked once, or even deceive himself. But the same thing could not be duplicated. He knew where the east was now.

"That's so," Max assented, "we'll soon have the jolly old sun peeping in at us. And I hope he warms up the air a little, too, when he gets started. But then, after we've put a few cups of coffee where it'll do the most good, I don't suppose we'll feel the chill so much."

Early though it was, apparently neither of the boys seemed to lack the desire to partake heartily of their breakfast. As Steve remarked, he never yet was known to go anywhere and forget his appetite.

"Some things I have left behind, I admit," he added. "Folks used to say I'd have lost my head long ago if it hadn't been tacked on by wise old Nature. But nobody ever accused me of getting separated from this bully appetite. It hangs to me right along, just like that Old Man of the Sea did to Sinbad the Sailor."

Max had it in his mind that he had known Steve,

hot-tempered, impetuous Steve, to lose his head many a time. But then he held his peace, and decided not to say anything.

When they had finished eating the sun was just getting up. And already it began to look more cheerful around them.

Bundles were made up and adjusted.

"How things even up," said Steve, with a chuckle.

"In what way?" demanded Max.

"We've had three meals on this trip so far, haven't we, Max?"

"That's correct," assented the other.

"Well, that far we've lightened our loads, and now this wolfskin that I'm going to tag along with me just about makes up for the loss of weight."

"Oh, I figured on that," said Max, "when I made you give over the hatchet and some of the other things you've been carrying, so as to even the loads up."

"Well, I'm about ready, if you are," remarked Steve.

"In one minute. Let me fasten this pack strap a notch tighter. There she is. Now we'll be off."

There was no hurrying Max.

He could move with wonderful quickness when he wanted to. But he could not be tempted to start off "half shot." Better make sure that everything was

in prime condition in the start. Then there would be nothing forgotten that had to be gone back after, and the straps of the packs would not chafe and bind because they were imperfectly arranged.

In many cases Max Hastings held up as his motto the wise old saying "the more haste, the less speed." He believed in the fable of the race in which the slow but steady-going tortoise beat the swift hare, because the latter, feeling so confident of winning with the big lead he had obtained, lay down and took a nap.

And in many ways a boy with the careful, methodical, yet active enough disposition, such as Max possessed, was bound to prove a valuable asset to such a headstrong fellow as Steve Dowdy.

When about to leave their night camp Steve turned and waved his hand toward the steady little shelter tent of boughs under which he, at least, had slept so well.

"Farewell, little shack," he said, tenderly, "farewell, and if forever, then forever fare thee well. You served us right handsomely, that's right. I don't reckon I'll ever see you again, but it'll be a case of 'though lost to sight, to memory dear.' What're you doing there now, Max?"

"Making sure the fire's out. You poured water over it from the spring, but there might have been just one live ember left. And, you know, it only

takes that much to start the biggest old blaze ever seen. Uncle Jim was so careful to warn us that I want him to know we never took a single chance."

And so Max carefully examined the ashes to make sure there was not a particle of heat remaining.

"Now, I can leave here with a clear conscience," he declared, as he picked up his rifle and took the first step away, looking back again just before the intervening trees hid the spot from sight; "and as you said, Steve, that wasn't a halfway bad little shack. It answered our purpose great."

"And what a fine spread we had last night," observed the other. "I think those grouse tasted just elegant. Fact is, they were better cooked as you did them than any bird I ever tasted from a frying pan."

"You hit the nail on the head there, Steve," declared Max, "and so far as I'm concerned I don't care how soon you duplicate those cracking good shots you made yesterday. I'll agree to make another green wood spit if you'll furnish the birds."

"That's a bargain, then," Steve went on to say, smacking his own lips at the pleasant memory he had of the late game supper. "But perhaps we'll change our programme to-day. Let's hope it'll be nice juicy venison this time."

"There never was such a thing as juicy venison,"

Max observed. "It's always dry, even when tender. Uncle Jim prefers squirrel meat. And he says he never cooks venison without larding the same with salt pork or strips of breakfast bacon."

"Like we did our birds last night, eh? Well, I admit that was a big improvement, and catch me forgetting the stunt you showed me. Perhaps in time I'll make something of a woodsman. I'm learning, and if I can only manage to curb this wanting to get there in a hurry disposition, there's some hope."

"Correct," was all Max added, but it stood for volumes.

They tramped on steadily.

At first, on account of the fire far ahead, Max doubted whether it would be wise for them to keep on in that direction. But Steve pleaded so hard he finally gave way.

"Might as well make it a trip of three days just as well as two," Steve had argued. "I never did believe in taking two bites to a cherry. We'll never be apt to come this way again, you know. And there's still some of that heavy timber ahead that you said you wanted to explore."

So Steve had his way. The desire to please his urgent companion overruled the cooler judgment of

caution. Later on Max found reason to feel sorry that he had ever allowed himself to be persuaded.

They kept on until noon.

Then the sight of a bubbling stream gave them an excuse to halt, for the purpose of further lightening their little stock of food.

"Never a deer, and all this tramping," complained Steve, as they munched away and washed down the food by copious drinks of cold water. "I'm beginning to believe I must be a regular old Jonah. If not, why does the game keep out of our way like it does?"

"Oh," replied his companion, with a chuckle, "you know there's a sort of wireless telegraphy of the woods. Perhaps some such message as this has been passed along ahead of us wherever we've gone: 'Look out for a terrible hunter, one Steve Dowdy by name. He's quick as lightning on the shoot, and if you let him just get his eye on you, your goose is cooked.' Now, in that case you could hardly expect poor timid deer to wait around until we showed up. They flew the coop long ago. But partridges didn't get the sign right, and you may have to be satisfied with such poor fare."

"Oh, they'll do a heap better than nothing," asserted Steve. "When you sight any more likely

places give me a tip, so I can change the shells in my gun. I'm not silly enough to let such things pass just because my heart is set on venison."

While they were eating Steve noticed that his companion turned several times and looked toward the west.

There was a little frown upon the usually placid face of Max, at which his chum could not help but wonder.

"What ails you, Max?" he asked, finally.

"I don't like the looks of it down yonder," came the reply.

"But the fire last night was in the south, wasn't it, Max?"

"That's so, but there seems to be a queer haze directly west, showing that there's still another woods ablaze out that way. Fact is, Steve, we hadn't ought to have come away off here in the big timber at such a time as this. And after we're finished our lunch we must cut sticks toward home."

"Then good-by to all chances of getting a deer," grumbled Steve.

"Oh, I don't know about that," remarked the other. "We'll circle around a bit so as to hit a course a mile or so to one side of the trail we made in coming. Perhaps in that way we may run across game."

"Thank you, Max, for saying that. But even if there is a fire to the south, and another to the west, they can't bother us any so long as the wind keeps in the north. Hello! it's died out, hasn't it, Max?"

"As dead as anything," returned the other, "and chances are, when it springs up again, it may blow great guns."

"And from another quarter, Max?"

"From another quarter," replied the other.

"South, mebbe, or from the west, you mean?" asked Steve, a little apprehensively.

"Well, look up and see those clouds coming up out of the southwest, Steve."

"I see what you mean. The chances are the new wind will be in the same quarter. And that would sweep the forest fires along this way like hot cakes."

"Just what it would do, Steve."

"Well, as we've had our bite, perhaps then we'd better hike out in the general direction of home. How far away is the cabin, do you think?" asked Steve.

"As the crow flies, perhaps twenty-odd miles, but much farther for us," Max went on to remark; and then, showing a trace of excitement in his manner, he continued: "There, that was a puff of air! Watch

that falling leaf, and it'll tell us which direction the new wind is going to come from."

The two boys glued their eyes upon the eddying leaf. Then, as it was caught in the fresh current of air and carried along, Max and Steve exchanged troubled glances.

"Southwest!" said Steve, jumping hastily to his feet.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE FLIGHT THROUGH THE FOREST.

THE two boys stood there for as much as half a dozen seconds, staring at the region from which the new breeze had sprung up.

Then they involuntarily turned their heads and looked at each other.

At such moments as these the true nature rises to the surface. Steve was quivering all over with excitement, and his face began to have an anxious tinge, although no one could question that the boy possessed as much courage as the average lad.

Max, on the other hand, appeared cool and confident. There was a glitter in his eyes, as though he understood that he was soon to be face to face with the greatest crisis in all his experience. His face might also have seemed a little paler than usual. But when he spoke, his voice had not a trace of trembling in it.

“ This looks like a bad job for us, Steve,” he said, quietly.

"I should say, yes," replied the other boy. "If this wind gets to hustlin', it'll bring that blooming old fire this way; ain't that so, Max?"

"No doubt of it," replied Max, beginning to pick up his now reduced packages and adjust them upon his person.

"Then we've got to start on the back trail right away, I reckon?" Steve suggested, following suit; though his hands trembled so with the nervous excitement that Max had to help him fasten the straps.

"Right away, Steve."

"Twenty miles and more from the cabin, you said?" continued Steve.

"We mustn't think of that at all," remarked his companion. "In the first place the neighborhood of the cabin wouldn't be any better to us than other places. Then, again, the breeze may sweep the fire around. It may not get over to where Uncle Jim does his trapping at all, but at the same time might cut us off from making our escape that way. Understand, Steve?"

"I think I get on to your meaning," assented the other.

"We must forget all about direction just now," continued Max, impressively.

"And regulate our going by the way the fire pushes along; is that it, Max?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"Well, I'm about ready," and Steve picked up his gun.

Max had made no remark when he saw the other fasten the wolf pelt to his back. But he thought a good deal, and believed that even Steve, set in his ways as he was, would sooner or later be willing to toss this prized object aside.

So they started.

At first they walked at a pretty fast clip. Steve pushed his companion hard during the next half hour. His enthusiasm in any new project outstripped all bounds. But, of course, this always exhausted Steve. He might make a good short distance sprinter, but he lacked the staying elements of a Marathon runner.

Still, fear has been known to accomplish marvelous things. People who believed themselves incapable of walking for years have actually started on the run out of a house afire.

And Steve might astonish even himself before the end of his experience in a blazing forest was reached.

"Whew! This makes a fellow pant some, Max."

Steve came to a halt as he spoke.

They had surely covered a couple of miles at this pace. But then, as Max had said, distance was not

going to save them now; they must depend more upon strategy in avoiding contact with the flames.

"Yes," replied Max, "it's rough traveling, loaded as we are."

Both boys looked back over the course they had come.

"The wind's blowing a pretty lively tune now," remarked Steve.

"It sure is," replied his comrade, as he listened to it coughing through the tops of the great pines.

"And it's getting livelier right along, too," continued Steve.

"That's right," assented Max; for the truth had been painfully apparent to him, at least fifteen minutes back.

"From the same old quarter, Max."

"Still southwest."

"And just as like as not driving the fire this way to beat the band?" Steve went on.

"That's a dead sure thing," answered the other.

"Hark! What was that? I heard something crackling like fire right there, Max?"

"Oh, don't worry," the second boy hastened to say. "That must have been some wild animal hurrying through the woods."

"Do you mean they can smell the smoke just as we do, and that already the panic has set in?" demanded Steve.

"Oh, no panic yet; but perhaps some cautious old buck deer thinks it about time to change his quarters. All animals are suspicious of smoke, you know, Steve."

"I didn't know it before; but, Max, seems to me that fire must be getting mighty close to us right now."

"What makes you say that?" asked the other, quickly, as he sent another glance of apprehension toward the suspected quarter, not knowing but what Steve's eyes might have caught some sign that he had missed.

"Because the air's so much warmer," came the reply. "Why, when we were eating our grub it felt raw and chilly, but now I'm burning all over."

"Oh, that's because of our walking so fast, Steve," Max hastened to say.

"Perhaps it is," Steve admitted.

"You'll feel hotter than that pretty soon," hinted Max.

"Are you trying to poke a scare into me, now, Max? Do you mean when the bloomin' old fire grabs us?"

"No, I only meant that we're not getting on fast enough, and the chances are we'll have to do some running soon," replied the other.

"But we've covered several miles, and at a pretty fast clip, I should say," Steve quickly retorted.

"Perhaps two miles, or two and a half, Steve."

"Well, yes, I guess that's about it," the other admitted.

"Listen!"

"Oh, what did you hear now, Max?"

"Hark to the wind! You can see it swaying the tops of the trees, and even down here it's blowing a whole lot."

"That's so," Steve replied.

"Perhaps ten miles an hour up there, Steve, and it's increasing. Pretty soon it may be twenty, thirty miles an hour. And the fire is carried along on the wings of the wind, Steve; not so fast, of course, but still faster than poor creatures can stumble over logs and roots and ravines down in the thick timber."

"Wow! I catch on, Max," said Steve, with a pallid face and distended eyes.

"Do you wonder, then, that many people have been overtaken by a forest fire, hemmed in by the flames, and burned to death? Come on, Steve. We're rested quite enough now. Let's get on the jump," said Max.

"You bet we will, Max."

As usual, Steve started in with a tremendous amount of ambition. Indeed, for a short distance it really tired Max to keep even with his impetuous

comrade. But ere long Steve began to puff and pant.

Max knew one of the reasons. He felt that he must no longer allow Steve to make a foolish pack horse of himself.

And so by the time they had possibly covered another couple of miles he caught hold of his companion's arm.

"Hold on, it's no use, Steve!" he said.

"No use! Oh, my gracious, it ain't so bad as that yet, is it, Max?" stammered the other, quivering in fresh alarm.

"I didn't intend to scare you, Steve," Max went on; "but I meant that it was no use of you keeping on carrying this load."

He began unfastening the bundle the other had fastened to his back.

"You mean my wolfskin, Max, do you?"

"Why, yes," replied the other. "A fresh green skin weighs a whole lot, and I see how it's weakening you, old fellow."

"But must I really and truly throw it away, Max?" pleaded Steve, who did hate to give anything up that he had set his mind on.

"Your life is worth something more than a wolfskin, I take it," said Max, grimly.

Steve was convinced. As the fire was not yet close enough to make itself felt or seen he had hardly

been able to fully grasp the situation. But accustomed to following the lead of this wise chum he gave in.

"Oh, all right; if you say I ought to, she goes, Max," and he took one last fond look at the bundle ere parting with it.

"Hold on," said Max, and he took the package from the other just as Steve was about to cast it aside.

"Here's a hollow tree," Max continued. "I'm going to drop it in, and we'll mark the place in our minds."

"Oh, do you think it might be safe there?" asked Steve.

"About one chance in three," returned the other; "if we can find our way back here after the fire is out we'll look for it, anyhow."

Steve watched the operation, and there was a wistful look in his eyes.

"Say, that hole's some big," he remarked.

"That's so, and queer shaped. I think I can find it again, Steve, though things are apt to look some different if the fire passes through this neck of the woods."

"I was thinking that we might get in there, too, Max," the other went on.

"Excuse me!" Max exclaimed. "I prefer the open to being caged up like a mummy. This way

you have a chance to change your mind. But once in there you'd have to take your roasting."

"That's so, I guess. I'm ready to gallop on if you are, Max," and, as before, Steve, refreshed from the short rest, made splendid progress for a time.

Half the short afternoon was gone.

Max knew that owing to the dense smoke which was beginning to spread around them, borne on the wind, night would very likely set in earlier than usual.

He noticed a good many things about that time, among others the fact that the clouds had actually covered the heavens even before the onrushing billows of smoke shut out all view above.

"Oh," Max was saying to himself just then, "if it would only *rain*, what a blessing that would be! A downpour that would soak everything and put out all the forest fires."

Steve was breathing pretty hard again. In reality he would have quit running before now had the race been for any ordinary prize. But life itself was at stake, and what boy but would strive desperately to the utmost in order to save himself from such a fate as overshadowed them?

By now they began to notice that the light of day was gradually giving way to a strange lurid glow.

"Must be gettin' awful close," gasped poor Steve, when he saw this peculiar fact for the first time.

"Not so very," was the encouraging reply of his hopeful chum.

"There goes a deer!" ejaculated Steve.

The animal could make much better time than the boy fugitives. With his antlers laid well back, so as to avoid contact from hanging vines and low-lying branches, the stag passed not twenty yards away.

In its terror, inspired by the strong scent of smoke, and knowledge of the danger that was coming with the wind, the deer seemed to have lost all sense of fear of mankind.

Steve could have easily brought the fine-looking stag down with one barrel of his buckshot-loaded gun. He had all along declared he meant to get a deer on this trip. But Max could not notice that he allowed his hand to raise the gun he was carrying even one inch.

Just then Steve rested under the impression that the deer was a fellow fugitive. They were all in the same boat, and fleeing from the greedy flames. No doubt, in the generosity of his heart, Steve was secretly hoping the gallant buck would make good his escape. He seemed too noble a fellow to perish so miserably in a blazing forest.

"Gee!" said Steve, with a long-drawn sigh, as the buck left them easily in the lurch and vanished ahead, "mebbe, now, I don't envy him them legs."

## CHAPTER XII.

### HEMMED IN.

ONCE more they halted to rest a minute or so.

Time was precious, and every second might count; but Max knew there was something else better calculated to help them than a mere mad scramble through the woods, heedless of where they were heading.

He wanted a chance to study the situation for a moment, to notice the actual direction of the wind, and perhaps change their course. To flee directly before the advancing flames was one way of proceeding, but it might be wiser for them to cut diagonally across the wind in the hope of reaching the outskirts of the fire.

No one could say what the chances were. All depended on the breadth of the breast of the flames.

Max knew he must keep his wits about him in this emergency. Everything depended on his being able to grasp any change that arose in the situation. If

he once allowed himself to get in the same excited frame of mind as his chum they would have very little chance.

"Ready, Steve?" he said, presently.

"Yes," answered the other, eagerly.

Steve noticed that they were no longer heading the same way, and, of course, he would not have been a natural boy if he had not wanted to know the reason why.

"Going to try cutting partly across the wind," said Max.

Steve, being bright-witted enough, immediately guessed the reason.

"Think you c'n get to the outer edge of the fire, eh?" he gasped.

"Yes, that's it, Steve."

"But why are we headin' this way in particular?" demanded the other.

The quickest way to get rid of such an everlasting questioner as Steve is to satisfy his curiosity. Besides, Max thought Steve ought to know, because they were equally interested in the result.

"Wind's in southwest now," he said.

"Yep," grunted the other.

"I think it's veering a little right along, and toward the west," Max continued.

"Oh, and that'll help change the rush of the fire, eh, Max?"

"Right. You see now why I turned to the left. We must try and find safety toward the northwest; because, with a west wind blowing soon, the flames will no longer be driven north, but toward the east."

Steve only grunted again to show that he understood. Breath was becoming too valuable a commodity now to be wasted in needless conversation. But doubtless in Steve's boyish heart admiration for this far-seeing comrade became deeper seated than ever.

More than a few times in the past had he known Max to save the day by his quick-witted common sense.

Perhaps Steve remembered just then the incident of the pond, when he broke through the treacherous ice, and might have had a more serious time of it than he did only for Max, who had remembered that fine plank.

Would the same generalship that had plucked him out of the icy waters be equal to effecting the rescue of the two chums from the blazing forest?

Now that they had changed the direction of their flight, and were no longer running straight away, the fire advanced upon them faster.

Max had expected this; in fact, it stood to reason that it must be so.

But he was cherishing strong hopes that they might be able to push beyond the extreme limits of the blazing forest before the situation became serious.

At any rate, they had made their choice now, and there was nothing left for them to do but push forward by every possible means.

The rest must lie in other hands.

Max did not allow that fertile brain of his to remain idle while they were running on in this way.

Several schemes presented themselves to his mind, but they were as quickly abandoned as hardly offering enough promise of success.

After all, their best chance lay in speed. As Steve himself had said, did they only possess those nimble legs of the fleeing buck how quickly would all their troubles come to naught?

But it seemed to Max that they were not getting on as well as they might. The fault lay in Steve partly, though the woods did seem to contain more obstructions than at any other time.

Steve was floundering by now.

The ambition to get along doubtless burned just as fiercely within him as ever, but the boy's powers were almost spent.

He tripped over logs that Max jumped across easily. Twice Steve banged headlong against a tree, being unable to change his course quickly enough. And then all of a sudden Max missed him.

Not having heard the sound of any collision, he stopped and turned back. There was Steve, all twisted up in a crooked wild grapevine into which he had dashed.

He was half choked and gasping for breath, yet trying with all his might to pit his puny strength against the sturdy vine that could have held a giant powerless.

But, then, that was always headstrong Steve's blind way.

"Back out!" exclaimed Max, taking hold of his trapped chum. "Go back the same way you went in. That's the only thing to do!"

He was ready to use the sharp camp hatchet in order to set Steve free should the other method fail. But it turned out that Steve could easily get out of the trap when once he applied common sense.

Through this same stupidity are green turtles caught in wide-meshed nets staked in Southern lagoons, like the Indian River.

Coming to the net they thrust their heads and then their flippers through. Being unable to carry the

wider shell through they just stay there until removed. And yet at any time it would be possible for them to back out, did they only possess intelligence enough.

And when Steve Dowdy became panicstricken and exhausted, apparently he did not have much more good sense than a green turtle.

After this adventure Steve was a little more careful. One choking was enough in his estimation. But his excitement did not abate a particle.

There was pretty good cause for it, too, because the situation had not improved a particle. Indeed, far from that, it was rapidly becoming appalling.

They could no longer say that the fire was not in sight. Looking back they could see it in many places, the flames leaping upward like giant torches, as they rapidly enveloped a tree here and there that happened to be of a species that was more inflammable than its fellows.

The smoke, too, was not only blinding, but it choked them. There were times when Steve, who ran with his mouth open, coughed savagely; while Max, who kept his teeth firmly together, got along in better shape.

And now Max could not say with truth that the heat was caused by their own rapidly pumped blood.

The air was growing warmer and warmer. If this kept on it must soon be fairly stifling.

Things were evidently approaching a crisis.

"Wow, I'm all in!" gasped Steve, coming to a halt in a weak way.

"Keep it up a little longer!" cried his companion.

"Can't. You go on, Max."

"And leave you here? Not much. We'll sink or swim together. But, Steve, buckle down to it again. You know our old motto, Steve?"

"Never say die, that's it," almost whispered the other.

"All right. Come along, we'll keep on fighting till we drop. Besides, I'm hoping we may be right close on the edge of the fire now. And, Steve, the wind did get around."

"Into the west—just like you said!" cried the other, bracing up somewhat, as though even so small a thing as that meant a great deal.

"Into the west, Steve. See, don't you feel it in your face now, as we start on again?"

"If that *is* the west—yes," grumbled the almost fagged-out Steve.

"I'm sure of that," replied Max.

But, although he thus tried to buoy up the spirits of his comrade in this gallant way, Max was secretly

not so very sure himself that things were looking as bright as he made out.

True, the wind had whipped around into the west, just as he said he believed it would do; but Max could not notice that the air coming from that direction seemed to be any less heated.

This made him fear that the fire had swung around, and was eating its way toward them from the west! Even if they could not see it as yet that was no sign of safety.

But Max also knew that he must keep up a bold front for Steve's sake. No matter what he really *thought*, he must not let the other guess it until there was no longer a chance to hide the truth.

Steve was on the border of a collapse, and once he gave up there was nothing that could be done.

They pushed on steadily for a little while, and things really did not seem to get worse. At least the change in the wind kept the fire from overtaking them from the south and southwest. And if only it had not swung around at the farther end of the line, Max could even indulge in new hopes.

He had by degrees altered his course again, so that they were now aiming almost into the north-northwest. This was his best policy under the new conditions, and he kept hoping it might turn out well.

Even Steve had managed to secure another grip on himself. Renewed hope is a great thing. It gives vigor to the muscles. Steve thought he had found his second wind, but that was not the secret. It lay in renewed confidence.

Believing that it was wise to get all he could out of Steve while this mood had full swing, Max encouraged and urged him on by every possible means.

In after days no doubt this scene would often flash into the minds of the two boys. Perhaps Steve might even start up from sleep with a cry of alarm on his lips, as it came again to him in his dreams.

For a short time the air had seemed somewhat clearer, the smoke was less dense, and the shower of sparks had almost ceased, as the changed wind blew them in another direction.

But now Max noticed that it was thickening again, and the smoke seemed to be sweeping in from the west, too!

There could be but one meaning to this. His worst fears were about to be realized and the fire bombard them from a new quarter.

Again he tried to think and make a mental picture of the territory over which they were now fleeing so madly. It was new ground for them, but he had studied the chart well which Uncle Jim had at

the cabin, and Max possessed a very retentive memory.

So he was placing himself, and trying to figure just how close they might be to the little river that made a goose-neck bend about this place, and into which ran the creek on whose banks the mink traps were spread.

Oh, if only they could reach this water, it would mean safety to them! No matter how cold it felt, how eagerly would they soak themselves and laugh at the efforts of the fire to get at them.

Again did Max try to encourage his weary chum.

"Keep it up, Steve," he said, as he caught the other's arm, and gave what assistance he could. "Only a little while more and we may make the river. It must be somewhere around here, I'm sure, Steve."

"The river—water—gosh!" was all the poor fellow could gasp, but all the same the very thought seemed to give him a new lease on life.

He nerved himself to do as Max asked, make another desperate effort to run it out, though it was really pitiable to see how weak he seemed and how he tottered.

But they had not been going on in this way three minutes when Steve came to a sudden stop.

"Looky there!" he cried, shrilly, with a vein of horror in his voice.

And Max felt his heart apparently stand still, as he, too, discovered the fierce red glow through the trees to the west and northwest.

The fire had swung around, and they were now almost hemmed in.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### ▲ GALLANT FIGHT FOR LIFE.

“~~We’re~~ cut off, Max!”

Steve said this, but those of his chums who knew him best would never have recognized the tones of his voice. Steve was almost tired to death. Soaked with dripping moisture from his own body, half choked because of the stifling smoke, and fairly gasping for breath, he talked thickly. Besides, as they came face to face with this new calamity, just when hope had begun to struggle up once more in their hearts, Steve was on the brink of a collapse.

And Max knew it.

He had understood right along that if they were to be saved from the fury of the forest fire, he must not only take care of himself, but assume charge of his companion as well.

Max was pretty well exhausted himself, it can readily be understood. Besides, the sudden realization of his worst fears came with something of a shock. But he had been partly anticipating some-

thing of this sort. Consequently, he was nerved to meet it, and not caught unawares, like Steve.

He must be brave, and assume even more of a hopeful spirit than the circumstances would seem to warrant—for Steve's sake.

"Looks that way," he managed to say; though what with the noise made by the wind in the tree tops, together with the roar of the not far distant fires, it was no easy matter talking.

His manner, more than his words, caught Steve's attention, just as Max had intended should be the case.

If Max did not throw up his hands and quit, there must be at least some gleam of hope left.

Steve had long since gotten past the point where he placed any dependence on himself. If they came out of this scrape at all, it must be entirely owing to the ability of Max to size up the situation, and engineer new schemes.

And so Steve clung to his comrade just then as a drowning man might to a straw. It was a forlorn hope.

"Must we stop here, Max?" he gurgled, piteously.

Had the other shown the least sign of wavering Steve would have doubtless immediately fallen in a heap, his last prop knocked away. But Max did nothing of the kind.

"Of course not," he shouted, as cheerily as he could, in the hope of bolstering up the wavering courage of his chum for a last desperate effort. "I expected this, you know. That's why I've been gradually changing the course again. Come on, Steve; we're bound to get to it soon."

"Get to what?" asked the other, despair struggling with a last flickering flame of hope in his heart.

"The river!" cried Max, clutching the other's arm, and actually forcing him to make a start.

"Oh!"

Steve had up to that moment utterly forgotten that there was such a thing as a river within seven miles of Uncle Jim's cabin, though they had found it once when covering the distance between the railroad and Jim's wilderness camp.

The little creek where the mink traps were set ran into this stream. That in turn served as an outlet for the waters of the marsh during times of heavy rains.

And through all their wanderings, yes, even while fleeing madly through the forest, with that threatening fire in full chase, Max had been holding before his mental vision a rude map of the surrounding country.

They must find that friendly little river now, or perish miserably. There was no other way.

True, owing to the remarkable long dry spell, its waters would have diminished sensibly, but doubtless it would be found of sufficient size to answer all their demands.

How much genuine expectation Max had, of coming upon the stream, he never admitted. Deep down in his heart, the boy, however, must have realized what a slender foundation he built upon.

A mere mistake of half a mile in his calculations would surely prove their undoing. Unless help came very soon now, Steve must collapse. And in that event how short a distance would he be able to carry or pull his exhausted chum before he, too, had to give in?

So, while Max was trying to appear hopeful as they made a fresh start, he was in reality pretty well demoralized himself. It was a time when stamina counted for something. Max was able to shut his jaws and summon a reserve force to his aid.

Lucky the boy who has this gift. It will carry him over many a mountain that at first sight looks unsurmountable. Some people call it grit; others speak of it as determination. In plain boy language, then, it is the spirit of never-say-die, "go-aliveness,"

that will hold out and fight so long as there is a breath left in the body.

Stumbling along, the two boys managed to make some sort of progress, but to Steve's excited mind it seemed as though they must be standing still. Perhaps he lived over again the horrible sensations of a nightmare, during which some awful peril was sweeping down upon him, and he could not move hand or foot, his whole body seeming to be paralyzed.

"Faster, faster, Max!" he gasped; "it's coming after us—it'll get us yet."

"I guess not, Steve," shouted Max, cheerfully.

Steve heard, and somehow seemed to hang his failing hopes on those words of his chum. Surely Max would not speak that way unless he had good reason for believing they were close upon the river.

In imagination Steve could even get a sniff of the refreshing water. Oh! how it would come as a balm to his tortured, smarting body. And if only he could get a drink to cool his parched throat, he might be able to keep up this gallant fight against the flames.

Perhaps this was just why Max spoke as he did; because he knew only too well his companion was in a condition where desperate remedies alone could work miracles.

Max believed that the end justified the means in

this case. He would not throw up the sponge until he had exhausted every possible scheme for outwitting the pursuing, exultant enemy.

They could see the flames in three separate directions now, and it was a spectacle that neither of the boys would ever forget. The fire, as a rule, ran along the ground, where the masses of dead leaves lay in winrows. But here and there, as though finding some resinous pine tree to its liking, the blaze ascended rapidly until the unlucky tree flamed like a giant torch held in an invisible hand.

And the crackle and roar had increased to such an extent that it was rapidly becoming deafening.

There was only one quarter exempt from this fiery touch, and they were heading into this now.

Did the river really lie there, or had Max deceived himself?

It was a vital question to them. Safety or destruction hinged upon it; but all they could do was to keep on and hope for the best.

Poor Steve was having the time of his life.

He could not lift his feet high enough to avoid different obstacles, for just then it seemed as though they must be shod with iron. Steve remembered hoisting the weighted shoe which a submarine diver used, who was giving exhibitions in the side show

to a traveling circus. His feet felt just as heavy. Consequently he often stumbled.

Many times would he have measured his length on the ground only for the friendly grip which Max maintained on his arm.

Once, however, Steve made such a sudden and furious lurch that even this did not save him. Luckily he fell upon a soft pile of dead leaves huddled on the other side of the log, and this kept him from serious injury.

"Are you hurt, Steve?" shouted Max, fearful that this might mark the end.

But Steve was already struggling to his knees. His breath was pretty much of a minus quantity just then, but he did manage to articulate one word:

"Gosh!"

Strange to say, that favorite expression of Steve's seemed to reassure Max. He believed that the fall had not brought any serious injury in its train.

But every moment the situation was getting worse for them.

Max saw that the fire was slowly but surely closing in from the rear as well as the west.

It was impossible to change their line of flight again, since they were even now heading toward the only quarter that offered the slightest hope. All they could do was to stagger on. A few min-

utes more and their fate would be settled. It all depended upon whether the river lay where Max figured it did, and if they could reach it in time.

One thing favored them, and somehow Max thought it a good sign, for when the situation looks desperate, small incidents are magnified vastly.

The wind, instead of increasing, seemed to be diminishing. It no longer rushed through the tree tops with the roar of a cannon-ball express train, Max thought.

True, he might be deceiving himself; or, on the other hand, it was possible that on account of the nearness of the leaping fire, there might be a temporary lull brought about.

Nevertheless Max clutched at this little straw just as eagerly as though he felt himself drowning and a log had drifted within reach.

Steve stumbled again. His legs were getting very wobbly now. Indeed, he was running more like an automatic figure than a real flesh and blood boy. Had Max even for one moment removed his sustaining clutch, Steve must have collapsed. And once he went down in this way there was no hope of his ever getting up again.

Steve's natural combativeness stood him in good right there. When he fell through accident, something within rebelled, and this compelled him

to stagger to his feet again. It would be different if he went down of his own accord.

"Are we near it, Max?" he called out, beseechingly, just as though Max were gifted with some seventh sense that could detect the presence of water even as thirsty horses or cattle do.

And because he could not deny the poor fellow the one little boon he craved Max dared to stretch the truth.

"It's right close by, Steve. Keep going, old fellow!" he cried.

"B-b-bully for that," Steve answered, feebly.

Max was really wondering whether as a last desperate resort they had not better throw themselves down behind the next log they came across. True, the chances of escaping by such means seemed very slight; but they were given no choice in the matter. It was either that or be caught in the open.

Already little blazes were beginning to start up here, there, everywhere around them, as the red cinders fell among the dry leaves.

Fanned by what breeze there was in front of the main body of fire, these new sources of trouble would soon amount to something, and in another minute, two at the most, the boys would find themselves in the midst of a roaring furnace.

Max groaned in despair.

He was himself on the point of saying "what's the use; if we've got to drop, it might as well be here as fifty feet farther on."

They had made a gallant fight, and really deserved better treatment than this, seemed to ring through the mind of Max.

He suddenly felt a sudden thrill.

True, it was only caused by Steve jerking his arm. But the other had been so long a dead weight upon Max that this sudden change in his actions gave the other a thrill.

Steve was really and truly invigorated. Something had put new life into him. He was no longer moving like one half dead. And as Max turned to look at his chum in the glow of the forest fire, wondering if Steve's mind had actually given way, he caught the words the other was pouring out in a bubbling stream.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE WAR OF THE ELEMENTS.

"THE river, Max, the blessed old river; look at it there, Max! Oh! ain't I glad, though!" Steve was saying in the wildest kind of way.

'At first Max was alarmed.

He had heard and read of men going crazy through thirst, and imagining they saw all sorts of cooling streams in the hot desert sands. Was Steve out of his mind?

But something impelled Max to tear his gaze away from his comrade and turn it ahead. Then he, too, gave utterance to a shout that exhausted about all the remainder of breath he had in his body.

Yes, it *was* the blessed river!

They had come upon it at the very horseshoe bend Max remembered noticing on Uncle Jim's chart. Had their course been some little distance in any other direction, they would never have reached the water; the gathering flames must have engulfed them before the extra distance could be covered.

New vigor seemed to be given to them by the glorious sight.

Why, inspired by a genuine prospect of escape, even Steve was able to run now. He forgot all his late demoralizing fears. Wings seemed to have been attached to his feet, as though he were a modern Mercury.

And of course Max kept alongside. Two or three times the boys found it necessary to slap out some little smoldering fire on their coats, where a spark had dropped.

But the river, with its cooling waters, was at hand. Nothing must be allowed to stop their wild plunge now.

A few more leaps, and both of them stepped in. Cold the water was; indeed, there was a skim of ice along the shore, in the little pockets where the current failed to keep things moving; but the boys cared nothing about this.

The river was low, and at its deepest part hardly came up to their waists; but Max noted with considerable satisfaction that it seemed fairly wide. He hoped that the span would prove enough to keep the fire from leaping across.

Beyond lay another stretch of forest, the muskrat marsh, the creek where the mink, the otter and the fisher abounded; also the snug cabin home of Uncle

Jim. And Max sincerely hoped these might be spared destruction.

He no longer really feared for himself and Steve. Nothing would influence them to forsake the river, now that they had found it after such a fierce search. And even if the fire did leap across, seizing upon the woods on the other side, all they had to do was to stick by the water.

If at any time the air became unbearably hot they could use the water to lave their burning faces. Should worse things threaten them, it was always possible to wade into the stream, and dip under from time to time.

How good it felt just to stand there and be able to slake their thirst again and again. Steve acted as though he could drain the whole river. But Max, being wiser, knew that they would likely feel the chill of the icy water if they remained there long.

"We'd better get out now, Steve," he urged.

"But this is good enough for me," the other protested.

"Yet, it's going from one extreme to the other," Max continued. "One minute we were burning, and the next we'll be shaking with this ice water."

"But lands sake alive, Max, I hope you ain't thinking of leaving this bully old river, after we had such a time findin' it. The f-f-fire might jump

across, you k-k-know, and c-c-chase after us some more. That would be f-f-fool play."

Steve was shivering, and it made his teeth rattle so that he could not talk without stammering. Excitement and cold combined brought this about.

"Oh! no, don't believe I'm in any hurry to leave here," Max went on to say, as he drew his chum along toward the inner bank of the horseshoe curve, "but we must get on shore right away, you know."

When they had climbed out, both were so weak that all they could do was to lie there on the ground. But there was plenty to engage their attention around them.

The fire made a glorious spectacle. Now that they were no longer in peril of their lives, the two boys could look at it from a different angle. Up to now it had only seemed terrifying. But with the air full of flying sparks, the flames spreading along the ground, here and there a doomed tree blazing like a fiery hand pointing upward, it might seem awe-inspiring, but could no longer arouse fear in the hearts of Max and his chum.

They had to dodge the descending cinders time and again, and more than once brush them from each other's shoulders.

"Guess she's goin' to jump, all right," remarked Steve.

"Looks like it," Max answered, gloomily.

He knew what that meant. Uncle Jim and the others would be burned out. They would doubtless have to seek shelter in the pond, even as Max and Steve had in the river; and that would put an end to Trapper Jim's staying longer in this region.

The prospect seemed anything but bright.

Already here and there Max could see little tongues of greedy flames starting to eat into the winnows of dead leaves that carpeted the ground. Why, in less than five minutes, doubtless a new bilow of fire would be rushing along with exultant cracklings, and showers of fresh sparks, impelled by the wind, heading straight toward Trapper Jim's cabin.

Max felt very badly again.

It was hot where they lay, each resting upon an elbow, and looking eagerly around; but they felt able to stand it after the recent chilly experience in the river.

Suddenly Max set up a shout.

"What is it?" cried Steve, excitedly.

"It's coming!" answered the other.

Now Steve's first impression was that his chum referred to the fire crossing the river. Perhaps it struck him that Max was a little slow, since it had already arrived. And just then something else struck him—in the eye!

It was a drop of water!

"Rain!" Steve burst out.

"Sure thing," echoed Max. "Hurrah! let's hope it'll be a downpour, buckets at a time. We can stand getting wet the rest of the way up, and it'll be the saving of the balance of the forest."

"And Uncle Jim's shack!" added Steve. "There! I felt another big drop. Look out on the river, Max. Glory! she's coming right along."

In ten seconds the drops were pelting them at quite a lively rate, and by the time half a minute had passed the rain was actually coming down heavy enough to make the two boys scramble to their feet.

"Guess we'll try and find some shelter," Max declared.

"Ain't that an upturned tree over there?" Steve asked.

It was still broad day. Besides, the fire gave plenty of light for them to see and Max instantly discovered that what Steve said was true.

"Yes, and when it fell, its root took up a whole lot of soil. It stands up eight feet or more, and we'll find a hollow behind it. Come along, Steve."

Indeed, things could hardly have been more fortunate for them. The fallen tree lay in just the right direction to offer a friendly asylum back of its upturned roots.

And as the rain came down slantingly it seemed to be kept away from their harbor of refuge pretty well.

But by now the two boys did not care very much whether they were soaked or not.

They had been through so much, scorched at one time and soaked up to the waist at another, that they felt as though able to laugh at a welting from above as a sort of joke.

"She's doing the business all right, anyhow," Steve remarked, after poking his head out, tortoise fashion, from the shelter.

"Yes, I guess all the fires on this side of the river are done for already," said Max. "Besides, the leaves will be too wet to burn after this. Makes me feel good to think that Uncle Jim's jolly little crib will still be there when we get back."

"Wow! see her come down, will you?" cried Steve. "Tryin' to make up for the long dry spell. It's got warmer, too, I reckon. Shall we stick it out here, or go home through the rain?"

"Better wait a while. It may stop and let us go along," replied Max.

"Fire's under control across the river, too," declared Steve, a little later. "Don't see a thing burning any longer. Even the trees have quit playin' torch."

"Yes, it's all over," said Max, with a sigh of infinite relief.

"Say, that *was* a scorcher!" Steve remarked.

"The boys'll think so when they see how our hair's curled up at the ends, and notice these holes burned in our coats," Max replied.

"It beat all other things that 've happened to us, Max. I reckon that must have been what they call a close shave. I'll never forget it as long as I live," and doubtless Steve spoke truly when he said this, for they had gone through an experience such as makes an indelible impression on the mind.

Ten minutes later and they made the pleasing discovery that the descending flood had visibly decreased in violence.

"Going to stop pretty quick now," announced Steve.

"Hope she will," Max added. "We've had all we need to put out the fire and give the streams some water before they're frozen up solid. And I'd like our last few days up here to be decent."

"Hey! it's stopped. Somebody found the old plug and put it in the bunghole up above!" cried Steve.

Sure enough, the rain had ceased about as suddenly as it began. But since it had saved the forest, there could be no complaint at that.

Accordingly, the two boys feeling refreshed more or less, and anxious to get moving, because they were shivering from their wet clothes, started out.

Max had a pretty good idea as to the quarter

where lay Uncle Jim's cabin, and he meant to head that way at least.

The afternoon was fairly spent, they were pretty well fagged out, and the chances seemed to be that shortly they would have to stop and spend the night.

Indeed, the sooner they got a fire of some kind started the better, Max was thinking, for he knew Steve would not be able to hold out much longer.

And when, after they had been moving along about half an hour, he saw Steve begin to stumble, he realized that the artificial strength which had come to the other after their escape, was oozing again.

"Here, we've got to spend the night somehow, and we might as well get a fire going, Steve," he sang out.

"Count me in there," replied the other, eagerly.

"Well, you do look pretty near all in," declared Max, laughing.

"Say when, Max."

"No place better than this, then," the other went on; "with the hatchet I can dig the dry heart out of this fallen tree. And once we get a blaze there'll be plenty of fuel handy to keep it going. Say, it's lucky we didn't throw away our guns, or even the coffee pot. A hot cup of coffee would hit the spot, Steve."

"That's right, it would. Woof! my feet feel like I'd stepped in a mud hole, and was carryin' off a ton of soil," and Steve would have dropped down on

a log only Max, knowing the danger of taking cold, would not let him.

"Hustle around and collect wood, Steve; it won't do to sit down right now. Let that go until we've got a warm fire."

Some boys would have wasted all their matches trying to get wet kindling to burn, but Max was up to many of the tricks of the woods.

With the handy camp hatchet he cut deeply into the rotten log. Just as he expected, he found it had a sound, well-dried heart. Splinters from this first of all fed the newly kindled fire. Then larger pieces were added, one by one. And finally Max had a blaze fierce enough to take hold of even wood that had been wet by the recent downpour.

"It's just wonderful how you do it," Steve declared, as he saw how successfully his chum had carried out his plan from beginning to end.

"All lies in knowing how," Max replied.

And that was the truth. Steve learned a lesson then and there that might prove of great value to him some day. Things are not always what they seem. There was that old log, for instance, to look at it, rotten and water-soaked on the outside, who would suspect that at heart it was so jolly sound and capable of affording them just the dry kindling they required?

They had plenty of material for a couple more

meals. And Max felt reasonably certain that they ought to be home by the next noon.

By degrees Steve's fit of shivering left him. With the heat of the fire to warm them up, and then following this a drink of coffee, things began to look quite decent again.

Max had done all he could to duplicate their shelter of the preceding night, but was not at all pleased with the result. However, it was the best they could do, while camped on the bank of the little stream that, swollen by the recent rain, ran noisily along in search of its big brother, the river.

Here, then, the two boys passed a rather restless night.

No more rain came down upon them, nor did new fires arise to give them further concern. The long dry spell had been broken at last, and no doubt Uncle Jim would cease to feel anxious, after they had shown up, of course.

When morning came the boys were glad indeed to welcome the sun again. It seemed to promise a clear, crisp, frosty day, after the combination to which they had been treated on the preceding one.

Breakfast was prepared and eaten.

Then the boys started out, heading for that quarter which would most likely bring them to the cabin.

They had not been more than an hour on the way when a deer was jumped. Both of them fired almost

at the same instant, and the buck went down with a crash. It was found later on that both of them had struck the animal in such a way that either wound must have proven fatal. So both could claim the credit.

Some little time was taken up securing the venison; and Steve loudly declared his belief that this buck was the very fellow who had dashed recklessly past them at the time they were fleeing so warmly from the pursuing flames.

It was nearly noon when they reached the cabin. Ed Whitcomb was the only one at home, and probably he would have also been out hunting for the missing boys only for his broken leg.

"Fire three shots, fast as you can," he said to Max; "that was to be the signal if you showed up here. I reckon they'll all hear it and come in."

So Max deliberately discharged his repeating rifle three times in succession. A little later he repeated the performance and an answering three shots came back.

"They've heard, and will be here soon," said Ed Whitcomb.

Half an hour later excited voices sounded in the woods. Then Uncle Jim appeared, taking big strides, and with the boys and dogs trotting along at his heels.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE LAST DAY WITH TRAPPER JIM.

"OUR last day here with Uncle Jim," remarked Max, on the second morning after the adventure in the burning forest.

He and Steve had not been out since. Although they felt no serious ill effects, still, their muscles had been quite sore, and they were only too glad of an opportunity to knock around all of the preceding day.

But it was different now, and Max at least felt that he must not let their very last day pass in idleness.

"I'm right sorry to hear it, boys," declared the old trapper, frowning. "I've enjoyed having you up here more than I can tell. It'll be some lonely for Ed 'n' me after you go away."

"Well, I'll be glad to get home again," said Bandy-legs, "but all the same I'd like to stay another week. There's a few things I wanted to do and never found the time."

"Try that chimney again, hey?" asked Steve, alluding to the time Bandy-legs had meant to startle them by lowering a tied up old piece of fur down, but losing his balance, had dropped in on them in a rather demoralized mess.

"Well, I reckon you're sorry you can't walk across that pond on the ice, hey, Steve?" Bandy-legs flashed back at his tormentor.

"I would if I stayed here a couple of days more," admitted Steve, "carrying along a board, you know, for safety. But that rain weakened what ice there was. Rain always rots the best of ice, you know."

"As for me," said Owen, "I mean to go out with Uncle Jim, and make the rounds of his whole string of traps."

"Me, too," declared Max, quickly.

"Reckon I'm in on that," said Steve, "and I'll try to knock over a few gray squirrels by the way, for a stew to-night. Uncle Jim likes squirrel a heap better'n venison, which is some dry, I'm confessing right now."

"C-c-count me in t-t-there," called out Toby Jucklin, who had been listening to all that was said.

And even Bandy-legs admitted that it was interesting to see just how a clever trapper could outwit a smart little woods animal.

"Sorry I didn't get all the way around the other

day," the trapper observed, "but when that wind got up I was some anxious about you two boys. I went quite a ways into the woods and when the rain came I turned back. Got to the cabin just before dark, hoping to find you'd arrived before me."

"He was worried some, we could all see that," Owen declared.

"And none of us slept much that night, either," Bandy-legs put in.

"You see," Uncle Jim continued, "when I went out the afternoon of the day you turned up, I found the paw of a red fox in one of my traps. I'd been so long coming, the poor little chap'd gnawed his foot off. And now there'll be another cripple fox around here. I hate that to happen the worst kind. But it couldn't be helped."

They tried to crowd all that was possible into that last day.

Once again the old trapper explained certain perplexing points connected with his peculiar work. It really seemed as though there were endless things to the task of outwitting those shrewd little bearers of coveted pelts. When one method failed to meet with success, Trapper Jim knew of others to try.

That was what made it so interesting; it was this constant battle between a man's wits and the natural instinct and caution of the animal. And in

nearly every instance the victory, sooner or later, came to the man. And the stake was always the pelt of the animal engaged in the rivalry.

Max felt particularly bad about leaving.

He understood the language of the woods much better than any of his companions could. Something in his nature responded to this call of the wild. He never was able to fully understand why it should be so, since his father did not seem to care for such things to any extent. But the feeling was there, in plain evidence. And whenever he found himself facing a vacation to be spent under canvas, or the roof of a log cabin, Max Hastings could sing for very joy.

He was really ashamed to let his chums see how badly he felt, and assumed a merriment he was far from experiencing.

The trail of the traps was a long one by now, and quite tired Bandy-legs out. Steve made fun of him as he hung behind the rest on the way home.

"Wonder where you'd have been, if that old forest fire swooped down on you, with your dumpy legs, eh? Reckon you'd have had to throw up the sponge, and drop off the perch," he went on.

"I guess I can run some when I have to," asserted the other, bristling up. "Takes a good many

more steps for me to get over the ground, but I do cover it, all right. Ain't that so, Max?"

When Bandy-legs made an assertion that he thought would be contradicted by Steve, he generally tried to drag another into the affair. Perhaps he thought to bolster up his case that way, or it might be counted on two being better than one.

"Oh! I've seen you make good time, and that's a fact," Max admitted, laughing, as though he recalled some ridiculous picture in which the boy with the short legs figured.

"Now, I bet you're thinking of that time Mrs. Dodge's bull terrier chased me," declared the other, with a grin. "All right, I had lots of reasons for wanting to sprint about that time. I remembered that my dad had warned me never to give way to temptation when he saw me looking up at her cherries. Besides, you see, the old dog, he'd gone and bit off the whole seat of my trousers, and I didn't want to take cold, did I? Course I didn't; would you? But I *can* run some, when I just have to, and p'r'aps I'd 'a' done as good as you did, Steve. From all the bruises you got, looks a heap like you banged into a lot of trees."

That closed Steve up, because he knew it was the truth. Max had not mentioned that part of the

story, but then boys have eyes, and the signs were plain enough.

The "take" that day was unusually large.

Trapper Jim declared he had never known such good fortune as had attended him thus far during the season.

"You boys brought me the best of luck," he declared, as he skinned his catch, so as to lighten the homeward journey. "I'm away ahead of any two weeks' trapping I ever did before. And that's saying nothing on account of the beautiful silver fox pelt that ought to bring a clear thousand. For that, if no other reason, lads, I'd say to you 'come again'; Trapper Jim's latchstring is always out—to you."

But the warm look accompanying these words told that the old man had taken a great liking for all the chums. Yes, he would miss their bright faces and snappy talk when they had gone. The old cabin would seem wonderfully dull evenings, after having their merry chatter around the hearth so long. And there would be no one to tumble down chimneys, break through the ice of the pond, or do any of the pranks that each succeeding day saw while the chums were there.

No wonder Uncle Jim looked sad.

He had never known how lonely it could be, spend-

ing a winter up here in the North Woods, until he faced this one.

True, he would have company in the shape of the repentant young man, son of the only woman Jim had ever loved in the long ago. But, after all, Ed Whitcomb was a full-grown man, and could never take the place of the least among these rollicking lads.

So the day finally came to a close and the sun went down in a blaze of glory.

"Promise of a good day to-morrow," announced Trapper Jim. "Clear and frosty. It'll be all right for your long ride."

"Buckboard and team ought to be here by now, hadn't they?" Steve asked.

"Thought I heard somebody holler down the trail right then," declared Bandy-legs.

"You were correct, too," said the old man; "look at the dogs listening. They know what's coming, eh, Ajax, Don?"

The big dog and the smaller one fawned upon their master as he mentioned their names. And just as Trapper Jim said, the buckboard soon hove in sight, the horses being driven by the man owning the team, and who was Uncle Jim's nearest neighbor, having a farm about seven miles away.

"Didn't know whether I'd find you burnt out up

here or not," the driver said, as he jumped from the long buckboard wagon. "Fire seemed to be runnin' wild all over this ways. Gosh! but that rain came in handy. In half an hour more my house and barn and hay crop would 'a' gone up the flume. Never was so glad to see rain in all my time."

Max and Steve exchanged glances and nodded.

They thought they had pretty good reason to be thankful for that sudden downpour, too, though it might not have helped them if they had not first of all found a haven of safety in the water of the river.

Of course the farmer expected to spend the night with them at the cabin. This would allow of a fairly early start. If the boys could catch the train they were after, they expected to reach Carson that same evening.

After a bountiful supper, in which pickerel, squirrel stew, and venison held prominent posts of honor, the fire was heaped up, and they all sat around on the rude home-made chairs, stools and benches, while they held the last animated talk of the trip.

Trapper Jim, coaxed by the boys, told many stories of former adventures, and from time to time Max would lead his chums in some rousing school song which had a chorus, in which Trapper Jim, Ed Whitecomb and even the tickled farmer could join.

They would not soon forget that last night.

No one seemed anxious to go to bed, because it made them seem unhappy to think that this was really and truly the last occasion on which they would all be together.

But finally Uncle Jim declared they must get some sleep, since they would have to rise so early in the morning. Places were found for all, and plenty of soft furs to serve as downy couches.

And by the time eleven o'clock arrived, Trapper Jim, poking his head out from his upper bunk, laughed softly to himself to notice how his guests filled his cabin floor. It was a sight he would often recall during the coming winter.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### HOMeward Bound—CONCLUSION.

THEN came morning.

Long before sun-up the inmates of the trapper's humble cabin were astir. Some of the boys looked after the last of the packing, and then breakfast was gotten under way.

They tried to appear as jolly as usual, but the old man knew they were sorry to say good-by. 'And while the rest were still eating he beckoned to Max.

"Manage to slip this in your bundle, lad," he said, holding up a package, "and promise me not to open it till you're aboard the train."

Of course Max did so. He supposed that since Bandy-legs and Steve had the bearskin pelt to come down to them later, old Jim wanted him to take a remembrance along.

They had described as well as they could the place where the hollow tree stood in which Steve had stowed his prized Canada wolfskin. Uncle Jim promised to look it up presently, and should it

have survived the fire, he said he would get it in shape to send down with the bearskins.

After all it was the pet 'coon and the bear cub that promised to give them the most trouble. The boys could manage them fairly well, but the 'coon was ready to nip anybody who came within reach, while Nicodemus was so contrary minded that he balked at times, and had to be pushed along by the whole crowd.

But then were the prisoners double the trouble the boys would not dream of leaving them behind. They felt that they were sure to be the envied of all Carson, when they arrived with such undisputed evidences of their vacation at Trapper Jim's cabin up in the North Woods.

Finally, the farmer had his team ready.

The bundles were loaded and tightly secured, for the road being rough, there would follow more or less jolting.

"Now hand me up the cub," said Uncle Joe, with a wink at Max.

Bandy-legs called on Toby for assistance.

"Lend a hand with him, Toby," he said.

"Hm! that's e-e-easy to s-s-say."

"Oh! shucks! you ain't skeered of a measly little bear like that, I hope," Bandy-legs went on. "He's as tame as anything now. Why, he drank his milk

right out of a bottle I was holding this very morning. Come on, Toby," and Bandy-legs stooped down to take hold of the cub.

Whether the animal really batted him over the head, or one of the boys gave him a sudden push, he never knew. Another moment and Bandy-legs was lying on his back, with the cub sitting on top of him, just as though he fancied such a warm seat, and meant to keep it.

"Take him off, somebody," roared Bandy-legs, kicking and struggling at a great rate; but the cub only clung tighter. "Hurry up," he's squudging me. He's pushing all my breath out, I tell you. Yank him off by the rope, Owen. Toby, help a fellow, won't you?"

They finally managed to push and drag the cub off the extended form of his new master. But Bandy-legs seemed in no great hurry to tackle him again.

"Wait, and I'll show you something," remarked Trapper Jim. "Kindness and being smart generally beat force all hollow. I'll coax Nicodemus to climb up here on the buckboard. Here, you hold his rope, Bandy-legs."

With that the trapper produced the bottle which had been used for feeding the cub his daily rations of condensed milk and water.

No sooner did the cub get a taste of what sweet mixture the bottle contained than he acted as docile as a pet dog. Trapper Jim kept tempting him on, step by step. When the cub hesitated he would let a little of the milky contents of the bottle splash about the muzzle of the bear. Out would come a red tongue, licking the sweet milk, and after that the cub was ready to follow that bottle anywhere.

So presently Nicodemus was aboard the wagon.

"Now give me the rope, and I'll tie the little fool shut," said Uncle Jim. "You expect to be home by evening. Now take hold of this bottle, and likewise the can of condensed milk. When he shows any tantrums just poke the neck of the nursing bottle in his mouth, and my word for it, he'll quiet down."

"But perhaps somebody mightn't like to have a bear cub aboard the train, in the same car with 'em?" suggested Bandy-legs. "You didn't want him sleeping in the cabin with us all after that first night."

"Listen to that, would you?" burst out Steve, as though dreadfully amused; "sure the simple guy believes he can keep the bear in the same seat with him. What you don't know about bears would fill a book."

"Then tell me, where will he ride?" demanded Bandy-legs.

"P-p-perhaps on the r-r-roof?" suggested Toby.

"Take the hobo seat, on the axle under the car," laughed Owen.

"Why, I should think he'd have to go like a hunting dog, in the baggage car," remarked Max, taking pity on the bewildered Bandy-legs.

"Sure, just as if I didn't know that right along," the other exclaimed; but his voice held such a sense of relief that it was evident he had had a problem solved.

"I'll fix it with the baggage master, too, all right. Goin' to put your 'coon in his charge, too, Toby!"

"O-o-only way," replied the other.

"Bet you he nabs somebody or other by the leg," suggested Steve.

"D-d-don't care, if only it ain't my l-l-leg," returned the owner of the ugly-tempered 'coon.

Finally, they were all aboard, the last hand shaking all around had taken place, the farmer cracked his whip, the buckboard started, and away they went.

As if saying farewell forever to the North Woods, where all of his eventful little life had been spent, the cub gave utterance to a half moan, half grunt.

They saw Trapper Jim waving his cap, while Ed Whitcomb stood in the doorway on his one sound leg, fluttering a red bandana after them.

Then a turn in the trail shut it all from view.

The boys looked all around avoiding each other's eyes, for each was afraid lest he betray his weakness by the unshed tears he could feel welling up. And all lads dislike to appear babies. Crying may do for girls, but boys, you know, should be above such a thing.

Soon they struck the edge of the burned tract, and it can be easily understood that both Max and Steve surveyed this with the keenest of interest, comparing notes as to how the wind must have been blowing to bring the fire within three miles of the trapper's cabin on this side.

They had told the whole story that same night after reaching home, as they all sat around the cabin fire. But a dozen eager questions from the others, now that they were passing the scene of the great conflagration, made them go all over it again.

Indeed, so realistic did it seem, that Steve even shuddered as he observed some of the stumps that, having been burned from top to bottom, stood up like black totem posts of the Alaska Indians.

"The finest little river ever," he declared as they forded it; "and only for it being where Max said it was, we'd been more than scorched, that's dead sure."

As the road was in fairly decent condition for

North Woods country roads, they made as good time as had been expected.

"We'll get that train all right, fellows," ventured Max.

"Yes, what's left of us," grumbled Bandy-legs, who was having the time of his life trying to keep the bear cub from falling off the bouncing buckboard.

Now and then, when they went dashing down a grade, there was a chorus of whoops and laughter and protestations, for boys and bear and 'coon became quite mixed up.

A few scratches, however, proved to be the only result of these several exciting comedies. Luckily Trapper Jim had blunted the keen claws of Mr. 'Coon some time previous, or he might have inflicted even more serious damage.

The railroad was reached at last, with blown horses, and a party of boys half exhausted from almost continuous laughter.

Later on their train came along, and all of them boarded the baggage car, in order to see about the disposition of the two "pets" they were taking home as mementoes of their vacation in the woods.

The baggage man was wise. He had not traveled this road for years without learning a thing or two. And so, after the respective owners of the live stock had secured their pets, making use of some staples

driven into the side of the car, and evidently used for chaining hunting dogs to, he built a fortress around them with trunks.

And so feeling that the pets would reach Carson all right, the boys trooped into another car, turned over a couple of seats, as there was plenty of room, and proceeded to make themselves comfortable.

It was then that Max remembered the package Uncle Jim had given into his charge, with positive instructions not to open the same until he was on the train and homeward bound.

The others heard him give vent to an exclamation, and crowding around, they stared at the contents of the bundle Max had opened.

"Wow! the silver-fox pelt!" ejaculated Steve.

"He wants us to have it," remarked Owen.

"Good old Uncle Jim, how fine of him!" Max said, in trembling tones.

"And worth a thousand dollars or more—whew!" cried Bandy-legs.

"S-s-see, there's a l-l-letter in with it," declared Toby.

So Max took it up and read it aloud:

"DEAR BOYS: I want you to have this valuable silver-fox pelt. Let Max get his father to dispose of it. He ought to refuse to take one cent less than a cool eleven hundred. And with the money, on your

first vacation go off on a good long trip, either South or up along the Great Lakes, like I've heard you talk about wanting to do. Only sometimes, when the notion strikes you, remember that it's going to be awful lonesome up here, and somebody write to

“UNCLE JIM.”

“Hurrah!” exclaimed impulsive Steve, “ain’t that just like the dear old chap that he is? Now we’ve got something else ahead to look forward to. We’re sure the luckiest fellows ever, and that’s right.”

“We may have other good times coming,” said Max, with a long-drawn sigh, as he tenderly caressed the soft silky hair of the precious silver-fox skin, “but there’s one thing sure, boys, and I’m certain you’ll all agree with me, when I say we never can have a greater time than we did up in the old North Woods at the cabin of the finest of his kind—Trapper Jim.”

“And that’s what we all say,” declared the others in chorus.

Whether this would prove to be a mistake or not only the future could decide. And some time it may be our pleasing task to let the reader judge, should we ever be called upon to narrate other adventurous outings of Max Hastings and his four good chums.

THE END.

## XI.

### CAUGHT IN A BLIZZARD.

The tremendous hurricane of snow and wind which swept over our great, level Northwest in January, 1888, was accompanied by incidents tragic, thrilling and heroic, that will no doubt become a part of the history of the vast region over which the storm swept.

In northwestern Iowa the blizzard descended with a suddenness and fury which made the early settlers shudder as they thought of the barren, unprotected prairies of fifteen or twenty years before. "If 'twasn't for our maple and cottonwood groves and big fields of cornstalks," said they, "wouldn't we ketch it?"

Happily, we had these protections, and suffered neither loss of life nor great inconvenience, though we complained more or less because our daily mails were cut off and our freights delayed even for a short period. But really our most important grievance when we are visited by these occasional fierce storms in winter is the stoppage of hay hauling, pressing and shipping, which is our chief industry at that season.

It was in connection with hay hauling in one of our marshy, unsettled townships that there occurred an incident of extreme peril, of fortitude and intelligent exercise of the faculties amid great danger, which, at the time it came to light, was almost lost sight of in our interest in the widespread calamities which fell upon our unprepared neighbors on the more newly settled prairies of the North and West.

The little railway station of Dupont, in one of the thinly settled districts, was built entirely in the interests of the hay-pressing business, for which the uninhabited flats of Lowland and Gull Lake townships furnish thousands of tons of grass.

The land in these townships is mostly owned by Eastern speculators, who obtained it cheaply under the first Entry Laws and the Swamp Land Act. Although much of it is excellent farm land, these owners have held the price so high as to keep off the actual settlers entirely. This they have been able to do by renting the lands for pasturage and haymaking, and getting enough out of the rent to pay the taxes, and even in some cases a fair interest on the first investment, which was extremely small.

Over this tract, a dozen miles in extent, as far back from the railway as hay can be hauled with profit, are scattered every summer the camps of the haymakers, and the low ricks or "stacks" grow and accumulate until they dot the prairie so thickly as to become for the time the distinguishing feature of the landscape.

There are at the station large hay barns, containing steam presses, to which, from September until April, the hay is hauled, stowed and baled, ready for shipment.

Among those who were hauling hay at the time of the great storm were Dick Jordan and his small brother Orr—named after an Iowa statesman—a little fellow, too young to attend school regularly, who went along on pleasant days to tramp down the hay in the frame of the big rack.

It had been pleasant enough for Orr to go on every trip that week up to the night of the blizzard, and the

day was so warm and fine that Dick's sisters, Jeanie and Carrie, younger than himself but older than Orr, obtained the permission of their teacher to go home at recess, in order that they might go with their brothers for a ride to the hay-field. Their mother had promised that they should go upon the first warm day after sleighing came.

They arrived at the house just as Dick and Orr drove up for a lunch, before going after their last load for the day, and, as it would be dark before they could get back, the girls, too, got each a slice of bread and cold meat to munch on the road.

Dick spread two heavy horse-blankets, which were always carried in winter to throw over his horses when standing, upon one of the bottom boards of the rack, and seated Jeanie and Carrie upon them. Then, little dreaming what was before them, the brothers and sisters drove swiftly out upon a new sleigh road, which led them for several miles over a prairie almost as level as a barn floor.

The haystacks were reached, and while the boys worked at their loading, the little girls raced about, tumbled in the hay, or rolled snowballs as they pleased.

The load of hay was taken from the bottom of a stack around which the snow had drifted, thawed and frozen until much of the outside hay had to be cut loose with an axe or freed with a shovel, both of which implements Dick carried for that purpose. It took much longer than usual to load upon this occasion, and evening was already drawing on when finally the little girls were helped upon the load and the team was turned toward home.

It had been mild and thawing all day, so mild,

indeed, that Dick had feared that this would be their last trip with a sleigh until snow should come again; but as he climbed upon the load to start for home, he noticed that a heavy gray bank had formed across the western sky, and that it seemed to be growing thick overhead. The air had suddenly become rather chilly.

He told his brother and sisters that it would snow before they got home, and that they had better "cuddle down" in the hay and throw the horse-blankets over their laps. He drove forward for a few minutes, urging the horses to a half-trot, and uneasily glancing toward the dense gray bank, which rapidly overcast the west and north, and threw a gloom and cold in advance, as it approached.

The darkness came on rapidly, and soon the roar of a high wind broke upon Dick's ears.

"It's a blizzard!" he thought, with alarm, for he had been bred upon the Northwest Prairies, and knew the danger of being caught out upon that mowed flat, so far from any houses, for the nearest dwelling was that of a farmer across Gull Lake, two miles and a half to the southeast.

He had not much time to think or to exercise his fears before the great storm was upon them.

It was nothing less than a hurricane from the beginning, and at the first fierce gust the big unwieldy rack careened with its load so that the little girls screamed with fright, and the horses stopped and stood turning their heads away from the pelting sleet which drove down at the first burst of the storm.

The air was filled instantly with the driving ice.

Dick shouted at the animals and slapped at them with the lines, but they could not be induced to turn

their heads against the storm. They stood as if paralyzed by the fierce blast of wind and sleet. Another and more furious sweep of the hurricane came almost immediately, and this time the rack was lifted completely off the sled and overturned with hay and riders.

Fortunately, there was a considerable drift of snow beside the road, and neither Dick nor the younger children were hurt by the fall. They had all, with a common impulse, jumped from the top of the load as it careened over, and so fell, or rather tumbled, outside the sweep of the rack.

As they scrambled to their feet the stiff wind was so filled with hay and snow that they could scarcely distinguish each other. The rack turned bottom side up, and, as it was built in the shape of a "figure four" quail trap, held most of the hay securely beneath its frame.

Dick still held to one of the lines, and the horses stood shivering with fear and cold, for the temperature had suddenly dropped far below the freezing point.

"Get behind the rack out of the wind!" he screamed to the younger ones, who were clinging to each other in the endeavor to stand up before the raging wind. They obeyed him, and, hugging close against the framework, found themselves protected from the cutting blast, but snow and sleet whirled over the top and about the ends in blinding scurries.

Dick knew instinctively that to attempt to get those children on the bare sled and to drive them to a place of safety only meant certain death to them all. In the first place, it would require all their strength to cling on. Moreover, they could not endure a half-hour even of such exposure to the storm. With darkness coming

on and the air filled with driving snow, there was the barest possibility of his being able to find a house—it could only be found by running against it or into a yard—even if he should be able to drive and keep the children alive all night.

His plans were quickly made, and a man twice his age could not have made them with greater good sense, or have shown a braver spirit in their execution.

He stripped the harness from his horses and turned them loose. Then, without waiting even to see which direction the animals took, he ran to his brothers and sisters.

Although it had been so warm when they started from home, their mother had insisted that Jeanie and Carrie should dress warmly, and take cloaks and comforters with them. These they had put on before the storm came, and Dick, after digging in the hay for a few minutes between the boards of the rack, discovered the horse-blankets upon which the children had fortunately been sitting when the load overturned.

While digging for them he had prepared a "nest," as he termed it, for the three small ones, and he now ordered them to get in there while he tucked the blankets around them. Frightened and hushed by the terrific storm, they obeyed without a murmur, and the brave young fellow told them that they must "cuddle close together and never peep outside" till they heard him call them.

He said that he would go and bring them something to eat as soon as he could get back from Mr. Walde-man's across Gull Lake, and then after the blizzard was over they would all go home.

He knew the snow would drift over them in a very

few minutes, and believed that if they kept quiet their breath would warm the "nest" and no doubt keep them alive for many hours. But he knew also that such blizzards have been known to last with unabated fury for two or three days, and that there was little likelihood of their being able to outlast such a storm. Therefore, his only hope was to reach help if possible, and get it to them the moment it should be possible to breast the blizzard.

Gull Lake lay over a mile distant, directly to the southeast. It was one mile and a half across it, and on the other side lay Waldeman's ranch, a large group of buildings, dwelling, barns and shedding for stock, enclosed by a large yard which stretched along the lake shore for forty rods or more.

Dick hoped that he might be able to reach this ranch and to find it.

Buttoning his overcoat tightly about him and pulling a "Norwegian cap" which he wore tightly down over his ears, he set out, going directly with the storm, which came from the northwest.

He started at a stiff run. The wind nearly lifted him off his feet at every step, and cut the backs of his legs and the sides of his cheeks icily.

He soon found it impossible to tell whether he was going directly with the wind or not, as it blew in changeful gusts and whirled violently about him. But there was a mile of lake shore in front, and he reached it at length and found himself upon the ice.

It had now grown dark, and amidst the pitchy blackness of night and the thick drift of snow he could no longer make use of his eyes. In fact, he was obliged to shut them and allow himself to be carried

over the ice by the wind. A part of the time he was able to keep his feet, but often he was thrown forward and actually blown over the rough ice for rods. The skirt of his overcoat occasionally blew over his head, and the bitter wind pierced every part of his body.

It was a rough and terrible experience getting across the lake, and he was glad he had not attempted to take his brother and sisters with him.

When he at length reached the southern bank, he was so chilled and exhausted that he could scarcely keep his feet at all. The bank was high at the point where he reached it, and he knew it could not be opposite the ranch fence, as the high bank was west of that. So he turned, and alternately walked and crawled eastward, guided in that direction by the wind.

For a long time he forced his way along the edge of the ice, which was swept bare, guided by the sense of feeling and the direction of the wind, but at length he stumbled against something and joyfully discovered it to be a fence.

As it afterward proved, it was an extension of the cattle-yard, a corner of which was built down into the edge of the lake to afford water for the stock, and had he missed it by even a few feet he would undoubtedly have perished.

The discovery of it gave him new life at once and aroused all his faculties. He climbed over the fence so as to get inside the yard, and then, by feeling, followed it until he came to a connection with the cattle-sheds.

Once in the shelter of these, he whipped his numbed arms and stamped his chilled feet until circulation was partly restored, then felt his way along to the barn, and at length managed to reach the ranch dwelling, guided

by the glimmer of a light which he could see through the storm.

He was welcomed and warmed and fed, and promised that by every possible effort that could be made the men should help him to rescue his brother and sisters when daylight came.

Dick found that he had escaped with only a slight frosting of his face and fingers, but his anguish on account of the little ones he had left buried in the hay was intense. He did not sleep at all, but walked the floor of the ranch kitchen, where he was allowed to keep a roaring fire all night. Every few moments he would go to the windows, scratch the frost, and endeavor to peer out into the storm.

He could gather no encouragement until daylight, when he discovered that the snow was no longer falling, and that the sky would soon be clear.

He roused the ranch hands at once, as two of them had agreed to go with him.

In a short time the men were up. Some hot coffee was drunk, a jug of it was filled from the pot, and a sharp-shod team was harnessed. The horses were blindfolded, their heads wrapped in blankets to protect them from the blinding drift which was still driving hard from the northwest.

This team was hitched to a double sleigh filled with robes and wraps. Then, muffling themselves in the bottom of the box, the party set out across the lake in the very teeth of the wind.

The horses were old and steady, and, after some snorting and tossing of the heads, as a protest against the novelty of complete "blinds," took a steady hard tro over the corrugated ice.

On reaching the farther shore of the lake and ascending to the prairie, Dick, with his head completely muffled to the eyes, took a standing position and, bracing himself, directed the movements of the driver. The short distance of a mile and the steady direction of the wind enabled him to hit the hay-road at a point so close to the overturned rack that he caught sight of the top of it as they were passing some rods distant.

A moment later they had halted and tied the team, and Dick had pointed out the spot where his companions were to dig. Then, utterly overcome, he threw himself upon the drift and buried his face in his arms. His grief and suspense at that moment were almost beyond endurance. He had no idea that the children could have survived such a fearful night. But five minutes of silent digging occupied his companions, and at the end of that time both of them gave a triumphant shout.

They had uncovered the nest and a cloud of steam rose up from the blankets. Dick was on his feet instantly. A moment later the three young Jordans were dragged forth, alive, but stupid with cold and a drowsiness which would not have left them alive many hours longer. Yet they had escaped any serious frost-bite, and a dexterous rubbing, shaking and jouncing restored their circulation and their senses. They were bundled into the sleigh amid robes and comforters, and, despite the severity of the weather and the drifting snow, were taken immediately toward home, where their welcome must be imagined.

One of Dick's horses perished in the storm, but the other turned up alive and well the next day at a farmer's stables twelve miles south of Gull Lake.

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